1. First Sight

This was the time of day when I wished I were able to sleep.

High school.

Or was purgatory the right word? If there *was* any way to atone for my sins, this ought to count toward the tally in some measure. The tedium was not something I grew used to; every day seemed more impossibly monotonous than the last.

I suppose this *was* my form of sleep—if sleep was defined as the inert state between active periods.

I stared at the cracks running through the plaster in the far corner of the cafeteria, imagining patterns into them that were not there. It was one way to tune out the voices that babbled like the gush of a river inside my head.

Several hundred of these voices I ignored out of boredom.

When it came to the human mind, I'd heard it all before and then some. Today, all thoughts were consumed with the trivial drama of a new addition to the small student body here. It took so little to work them all up. I'd seen the new face repeated in thought after thought from every angle. Just an ordinary human girl. The excitement over her arrival was tiresomely predictable—like flashing a shiny object at a child. Half the sheep-like males were already imagining themselves in love with her, just because she was something new to look at. I tried harder to tune them out.

Only four voices did I block out of courtesy rather than distaste: my family, my two brothers and two sisters, who were so used to the lack of privacy in my presence that they rarely gave it a thought. I gave them what privacy I could. I tried not to listen if I could help it.

Try as I may, still…I knew.

Rosalie was thinking, as usual, about herself. She'd caught sight of her profile in the reflection off someone's glasses, and she was mulling over her own perfection. Rosalie's mind was a shallow pool with few surprises.

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Emmett was fuming over a wrestling match he'd lost to Jasper during the night. It would take all his limited patience to make it to the end of the school day to orchestrate a rematch. I never really felt intrusive hearing Emmett's thoughts, because he never thought one thing that he would not say aloud or put into action. Perhaps I only felt guilty reading the others' minds because I knew there were things there that they wouldn't want me to know. If Rosalie's mind was a shallow pool, then Emmett's was a lake with no shadows, glass clear.

And Jasper was…suffering. I suppressed a sigh.

Edward. Alice called my name in her head, and had my attention at once.

It was just the same as having my name called aloud. I was glad my given name had fallen out of style lately—it had been annoying; anytime anyone thought of any Edward, my head would turn automatically…

My head didn't turn now. Alice and I were good at these private conversations. It was rare that anyone caught us. I kept my eyes on the lines in the plaster.

How is he holding up? she asked me.

I frowned, just a small change in the set of my mouth. Nothing that would tip the others off. I could easily be frowning out of boredom.

Alice's mental tone was alarmed now, and I saw in her mind that she was watching Jasper in her peripheral vision. *Is there any danger?* She searched ahead, into the immediate future, skimming through visions of monotony for the source behind my frown.

I turned my head slowly to the left, as if looking at the bricks of the wall, sighed, and then to the right, back to the cracks in the ceiling. Only Alice knew I was shaking my head.

She relaxed. *Let me know if it gets too bad.*

I moved only my eyes, up to the ceiling above, and back down.

Thanks for doing this.

I was glad I couldn't answer her aloud. What would I say? 'My pleasure'? It was hardly that. I didn't enjoy listening to Jasper's struggles. Was it really necessary to experiment like this? Wouldn't the safer path be to just admit that he might never be able

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to handle the thirst the way the rest of us could, and not push his limits? Why flirt with disaster?

It had been two weeks since our last hunting trip. That was not an immensely difficult time span for the rest of us. A little uncomfortable occasionally—if a human walked too close, if the wind blew the wrong way. But humans rarely walked too close. Their instincts told them what their conscious minds would never understand: we were dangerous.

Jasper was very dangerous right now.

At that moment, a small girl paused at the end of the closest table to ours, stopping to talk to a friend. She tossed her short, sandy hair, running her fingers through it. The heaters blew her scent in our direction. I was used to the way that scent made me feel—the dry ache in my throat, the hollow yearn in my stomach, the automatic tightening of my muscles, the excess flow of venom in my mouth…

This was all quite normal, usually easy to ignore. It was harder just now, with the feelings stronger, doubled, as I monitored Jasper's reaction. Twin thirsts, rather than just mine.

Jasper was letting his imagination get away from him. He was picturing it—picturing himself getting up from his seat next to Alice and going to stand beside the little girl. Thinking of leaning down and in, as if he were going to whisper in her ear, and letting his lips touch the arch of her throat. Imagining how the hot flow of her pulse beneath the fine skin would feel under his mouth…

I kicked his chair.

He met my gaze for a minute, and then looked down. I could hear shame and rebellion war in his head.

"Sorry," Jasper muttered.

I shrugged.

"You weren't going to do anything," Alice murmured to him, soothing his chagrin. "I could see that."

I fought back the grimace that would give her lie away. We had to stick together, Alice and I. It wasn't easy, hearing voices or seeing visions of the future. Both freaks among those who were already freaks. We protected each other's secrets.

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"It helps a little if you think of them as people," Alice suggested, her high, musical voice too fast for human ears to understand, if any had been close enough to hear. "Her name is Whitney. She has a baby sister she adores. Her mother invited Esme to that garden party, do you remember?"

"I know who she is," Jasper said curtly. He turned away to stare out one of the small windows that were spaced just under the eaves around the long room. His tone ended the conversation.

He would have to hunt tonight. It was ridiculous to take risks like this, trying to test his strength, to build his endurance. Jasper should just accept his limitations and work within them. His former habits were not conducive to our chosen lifestyle; he shouldn't push himself in this way.

Alice sighed silently and stood, taking her tray of food—her prop, as it were—with her and leaving him alone. She knew when he'd had enough of her encouragement. Though Rosalie and Emmett were more flagrant about their relationship, it was Alice and Jasper who knew each other's every mood as well as their own. As if they could read minds, too—only just each other's.

Edward Cullen.

Reflex reaction. I turned to the sound of my name being called, though it wasn't being called, just thought.

My eyes locked for a small portion of a second with a pair of wide, chocolate-brown human eyes set in a pale, heart-shaped face. I knew the face, though I'd never seen it myself before this moment. It had been foremost in every human head today. The new student, Isabella Swan. Daughter of the town's chief of police, brought to live here by some new custody situation. Bella. She'd corrected everyone who'd used her full name…

I looked away, bored. It took me a second to realize that she had not been the one to think my name.

Of course she's already crushing on the Cullens, I heard the first thought continue.

Now I recognized the 'voice.' Jessica Stanley—it had been a while since she'd bothered me with her internal chatter. What a relief it had been when she'd gotten over

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her misplaced infatuation. It used to be nearly impossible to escape her constant, ridiculous daydreams. I'd wished, at the time, that I could explain to her *exactly* what would have happened if my lips, and the teeth behind them, had gotten anywhere near her. That would have silenced those annoying fantasies. The thought of her reaction almost made me smile.

Fat lot of good it will do her, Jessica went on. *She's really not even pretty. I don't know why Eric is staring so much…or Mike.*

She winced mentally on the last name. Her new infatuation, the generically popular Mike Newton, was completely oblivious to her. Apparently, he was not as oblivious to the new girl. Like the child with the shiny object again. This put a mean edge to Jessica's thoughts, though she was outwardly cordial to the newcomer as she explained to her the commonly held knowledge about my family. The new student must have asked about us.

Everyone's looking at me today, too, Jessica thought smugly in an aside. *Isn't it lucky Bella had two classes with me…I'll bet Mike will want to ask me what she's—*

I tried to block the inane chatter out of my head before the petty and the trivial could drive me mad.

"Jessica Stanley is giving the new Swan girl all the dirty laundry on the Cullen clan," I murmured to Emmett as a distraction.

He chuckled under his breath. *I hope she's making it good,* he thought.

"Rather unimaginative, actually. Just the barest hint of scandal. Not an ounce of horror. I'm a little disappointed."

And the new girl? Is she disappointed in the gossip as well?

I listened to hear what this new girl, Bella, thought of Jessica's story. What did she see when she looked at the strange, chalky-skinned family that was universally avoided?

It was sort of my responsibility to know her reaction. I acted as a lookout, for lack of a better word, for my family. To protect us. If anyone ever grew suspicious, I could give us early warning and an easy retreat. It happened occasionally—some human with an active imagination would see in us the characters of a book or a movie. Usually they got it wrong, but it was better to move on somewhere new than to risk scrutiny.

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Very, very rarely, someone would guess right. We didn't give them a chance to test their hypothesis. We simply disappeared, to become no more than a frightening memory…

I heard nothing, though I listened close beside where Jessica's frivolous internal monologue continued to gush. It was as if there was no one sitting beside her. How peculiar, had the girl moved? That didn't seem likely, as Jessica was still babbling to her. I looked up to check, feeling off-balance. Checking on what my extra 'hearing' could tell me—it wasn't something I ever had to do.

Again, my gaze locked on those same wide brown eyes. She was sitting right where she had been before, and looking at us, a natural thing to be doing, I supposed, as Jessica was still regaling her with the local gossip about the Cullens.

Thinking about us, too, would be natural.

But I couldn't hear a whisper.

Inviting warm red stained her cheeks as she looked down, away from the embarrassing gaffe of getting caught staring at a stranger. It was good that Jasper was still gazing out the window. I didn't like to imagine what that easy pooling of blood would do to his control.

The emotions had been as clear on her face as if they were spelled out in words across her forehead: surprise, as she unknowingly absorbed the signs of the subtle differences between her kind and mine, curiosity, as she listened to Jessica's tale, and something more…fascination? It wouldn't be the first time. We were beautiful to them, our intended prey. Then, finally, embarrassment as I caught her staring at me.

And yet, though her thoughts had been so clear in her odd eyes—odd, because of the depth to them; brown eyes often seemed flat in their darkness—I could hear nothing but silence from the place she was sitting. Nothing at all.

I felt a moment of unease.

This was nothing I'd ever encountered before. Was there something wrong with me? I felt exactly the same as I always did. Worried, I listened harder.

All the voices I'd been blocking were suddenly shouting in my head.

…wonder what music she likes…maybe I could mention that new CD… Mike Newton was thinking, two tables away—fixated on Bella Swan.

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Look at him staring at her. Isn't it enough that he has half the girls in school waiting for him to… Eric Yorkie was thinking sulfurous thoughts, also revolving around the girl.

…so disgusting. You'd think she was famous or something… Even Edward Cullen*, staring…* Lauren Mallory was so jealous that her face, by all rights, should be dark jade in color. *And Jessica, flaunting her new best friend. What a joke…* Vitriol continued to spew from the girl's thoughts.

…I bet everyone has asked her that. But I'd like to talk to her. I'll think of a more original question… Ashley Dowling mused.

…maybe she'll be in my Spanish… June Richardson hoped.

…tons left to do tonight! Trig, and the English test. I hope my mom… Angela Weber, a quiet girl, whose thoughts were unusually kind, was the only one at the table who wasn't obsessed with this Bella.

I could hear them all, hear every insignificant thing they were thinking as it passed through their minds. But nothing at all from the new student with the deceptively communicative eyes.

And, of course, I could hear what the girl said when she spoke to Jessica. I didn't have to read minds to be able to hear her low, clear voice on the far side of the long room.

"Which one is the boy with the reddish brown hair?" I heard her ask, sneaking a look at me from the corner of her eye, only to look quickly away when she saw that I was still staring.

If I'd had time to hope that hearing the sound of her voice would help me pinpoint the tone of her thoughts, lost somewhere where I couldn't access them, I was instantly disappointed. Usually, people's thoughts came to them in a similar pitch as their physical voices. But this quiet, shy voice was unfamiliar, not one of the hundreds of thoughts bouncing around the room, I was sure of that. Entirely new.

Oh, good luck, idiot! Jessica thought before answering the girl's question. "That's Edward. He's gorgeous, of course, but don't waste your time. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are good-looking enough for him." She sniffed.

I turned my head away to hide my smile. Jessica and her classmates had no idea how lucky they were that none of them particularly appealed to me.

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Beneath the transient humor, I felt a strange impulse, one I did not clearly understand. It had something to do with the vicious edge to Jessica's thoughts that the new girl was unaware of… I felt the strangest urge to step in between them, to shield this Bella Swan from the darker workings of Jessica's mind. What an odd thing to feel. Trying to ferret out the motivations behind the impulse, I examined the new girl one more time.

Perhaps it was just some long buried protective instinct—the strong for the weak. This girl looked more fragile than her new classmates. Her skin was so translucent it was hard to believe it offered her much defense from the outside world. I could see the rhythmic pulse of blood through her veins under the clear, pale membrane… But I should not concentrate on that. I was good at this life I'd chosen, but I was just as thirsty as Jasper and there was no point in inviting temptation.

There was a faint crease between her eyebrows that she seemed unaware of.

It was unbelievable frustrating! I could clearly see that it was a strain for her to sit there, to make conversation with strangers, to be the center of attention. I could sense her shyness from the way she held her frail-looking shoulders, slightly hunched, as if she was expecting a rebuff at any moment. And yet I could only sense, could only see, could only imagine. There was nothing but silence from the very unexceptional human girl. I could hear nothing. Why?

"Shall we?" Rosalie murmured, interrupting my focus.

I looked away from the girl with a sense of relief. I didn't want to continue to fail at this—it irritated me. And I didn't want to develop any interest in her hidden thoughts simply because they were hidden from me. No doubt, when I did decipher her thoughts—and I *would* find a way to do so—they would be just as petty and trivial as any human's thoughts. Not worth the effort I would expend to reach them.

"So, is the new one afraid of us yet?" Emmett asked, still waiting for my response to his question before.

I shrugged. He wasn't interested enough to press for a more information. Nor should I be interested.

We got up from the table and walked out of the cafeteria.

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Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper were pretending to be seniors; they left for their classes. I was playing a younger role than they. I headed off for my junior level biology class, preparing my mind for the tedium. It was doubtful Mr. Banner, a man of no more than average intellect, would manage to pull out anything in his lecture that would surprise someone holding two graduate degrees in medicine.

In the classroom, I settled into my chair and let my books—props, again; they held nothing I didn't already know—spill across the table. I was the only student who had a table to himself. The humans weren't smart enough to *know* that they feared me, but their survival instincts were enough to keep them away.

The room slowly filled as they trickled in from lunch. I leaned back in my chair and waited for the time to pass. Again, I wished I was able to sleep.

Because I'd been thinking about her, when Angela Weber escorted the new girl through the door, her name intruded on my attention.

Bella seems just as shy as me. I'll bet today is really hard for her. I wish I could say something…but it would probably just sound stupid…

Yes! Mike Newton thought, turning in his seat to watch the girls enter.

Still, from the place where Bella Swan stood, nothing. The empty space where her thoughts should be irritated and unnerved me.

She came closer, walking down the aisle beside me to get to the teacher's desk. Poor girl; the seat next to me was the only one available. Automatically, I cleared what would be her side of the desk, shoving my books into a pile. I doubted she would feel very comfortable there. She was in for a long semester—in this class, at least. Perhaps, though, sitting beside her, I'd be able to flush out her secrets…not that I'd ever needed close proximity before…not that I would find anything worth listening to…

Bella Swan walked into the flow of the heated air that blew toward me from the vent.

Her scent hit me like wrecking ball, like a battering ram. There was no image violent enough to encapsulate the force of what happened to me in that moment.

In that instant, I was nothing close to the human I'd once been; no trace of the shreds of humanity I'd managed to cloak myself in remained.

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I was a predator. She was my prey. There was nothing else in the whole world but that truth.

There was no room full of witnesses—they were already collateral damage in my head. The mystery of her thoughts was forgotten. Her thoughts meant nothing, for she would not go on thinking them much longer.

I was a vampire, and she had the sweetest blood I'd smelled in eighty years.

I hadn't imagined such a scent could exist. If I'd known it did, I would have gone searching for it long ago. I would have combed the planet for her. I could imagine the taste…

Thirst burned through my throat like fire. My mouth was baked and desiccated. The fresh flow of venom did nothing to dispel that sensation. My stomach twisted with the hunger that was an echo of the thirst. My muscles coiled to spring.

Not a full second had passed. She was still taking the same step that had put her downwind from me.

As her foot touched the ground, her eyes slid toward me, a movement she clearly meant to be stealthy. Her glance met mine, and I saw myself reflected in the wide mirror of her eyes.

The shock of the face I saw there saved her life for a few thorny moments.

She didn't make it easier. When she processed the expression on my face, blood flooded her cheeks again, turning her skin the most delicious color I'd ever seen. The scent was a thick haze in my brain. I could barely think through it. My thoughts raged, resisting control, incoherent.

She walked more quickly now, as if she understood the need to escape. Her haste made her clumsy—she tripped and stumbled forward, almost falling into the girl seated in front of me. Vulnerable, weak. Even more than usual for a human.

I tried to focus on the face I'd seen in her eyes, a face I recognized with revulsion. The face of the monster in me—the face I'd beaten back with decades of effort and uncompromising discipline. How easily it sprang to the surface now!

The scent swirled around me again, scattering my thoughts and nearly propelling me out of my seat.

No.

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My hand gripped under the edge of the table as I tried to hold myself in my chair. The wood was not up to the task. My hand crushed through the strut and came away with a palmful of splintered pulp, leaving the shape of my fingers carved into the remaining wood.

Destroy evidence. That was a fundamental rule. I quickly pulverized the edges of the shape with my fingertips, leaving nothing but a ragged hole and a pile of shavings on the floor, which I scattered with my foot.

Destroy evidence. Collateral damage….

I knew what had to happen now. The girl would have to come sit beside me, and I would have to kill her.

The innocent bystanders in this classroom, eighteen other children and one man, could not be allowed to leave this room, having seen what they would soon see.

I flinched at the thought of what I must do. Even at my very worst, I had never committed this kind of atrocity. I had never killed innocents, not in over eight decades. And now I planned to slaughter twenty of them at once.

The face of the monster in the mirror mocked me.

Even as part of me shuddered away from the monster, another part was planning it.

If I killed the girl first, I would have only fifteen or twenty seconds with her before the humans in the room would react. Maybe a little bit longer, if at first they did not realize what I was doing. She would not have time to scream or feel pain; I would not kill her cruelly. That much I could give this stranger with her horribly desirable blood.

But then I would have to stop them from escaping. I wouldn't have to worry about the windows, too high up and small to provide an escape for anyone. Just the door—block that and they were trapped.

It would be slower and more difficult, trying to take them all down when they were panicked and scrambling, moving in chaos. Not impossible, but there would be much more noise. Time for lots of screaming. Someone would hear…and I'd be forced to kill even more innocents in this black hour.

And her blood would cool, while I murdered the others.

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The scent punished me, closing my throat with dry aching…

So the witnesses first then.

I mapped it out in my head. I was in the middle of the room, the furthest row in the back. I would take my right side first. I could snap four or five of their necks per second, I estimated. It would not be noisy. The right side would be the lucky side; they would not see me coming. Moving around the front and back up the left side, it would take me, at most, five seconds to end every life in this room.

Long enough for Bella Swan to see, briefly, what was coming for her. Long enough for her to feel fear. Long enough, maybe, if shock didn't freeze her in place, for her to work up a scream. One soft scream that would not bring anyone running.

I took a deep breath, and the scent was a fire that raced through my dry veins, burning out from my chest to consume every better impulse that I was capable of.

She was just turning now. In a few seconds, she would sit down inches away from me.

The monster in my head smiled in anticipation.

Someone slammed shut a folder on my left. I didn't look up to see which of the doomed humans it was. But the motion sent a wave of ordinary, unscented air wafting across my face.

For one short second, I was able to think clearly. In that precious second, I saw two faces in my head, side by side.

One was mine, or rather had been: the red-eyed monster that had killed so many people that I'd stop counting their numbers. Rationalized, justified murders. A killer of killers, a killer of other, less powerful monsters. It was a god complex, I acknowledged that—deciding who deserved a death sentence. It was a compromise with myself. I had fed on human blood, but only by the loosest definition. My victims were, in their various dark pastimes, barely more human than I was.

The other face was Carlisle's.

There was no resemblance between the two faces. They were bright day and blackest night.

There was no reason for there to be a resemblance. Carlisle was not my father in the basic biological sense. We shared no common features. The similarity in our

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coloring was a product of what we were; every vampire had the same ice pale skin. The similarity in the color of our eyes was another matter—a reflection of a mutual choice.

And yet, though there was no basis for a resemblance, I'd imagined that my face had begun to reflect his, to an extent, in the last seventy-odd years that I had embraced his choice and followed in his steps. My features had not changed, but it seemed to me like some of his wisdom had marked my expression, that a little of his compassion could be traced in the shape of my mouth, and hints of his patience were evident on my brow.

All those tiny improvements were lost in the face of the monster. In a few moments, there would be nothing left in me that would reflect the years I'd spent with my creator, my mentor, my father in all the ways that counted. My eyes would glow red as a devil's; all likeness would be lost forever.

In my head, Carlisle's kind eyes did not judge me. I knew that he would forgive me for this horrible act that I would do. Because he loved me. Because he thought I was better than I was. And he would still love me, even as I now proved him wrong.

Bella Swan sat down in the chair next to me, her movements stiff and awkward—with fear?—and the scent of her blood bloomed in an inexorable cloud around me.

I would prove my father wrong about me. The misery of this fact hurt almost as much as the fire in my throat.

I leaned away from her in revulsion—revolted by the monster aching to take her.

Why did she have to come here? Why did she have to exist? Why did she have to ruin the little peace I had in this non-life of mine? Why had this aggravating human ever been born? She would ruin me.

I turned my face away from her, as a sudden fierce, unreasoning hatred washed through me.

Who *was* this creature? Why me, why now? Why did I have to lose everything just because she happened to choose this unlikely town to appear in?

Why had she come here!

I didn't want to be the monster! I didn't want to kill this room full of harmless children! I didn't want to lose everything I'd gained in a lifetime of sacrifice and denial!

I wouldn't. She couldn't make me.

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The scent was the problem, the hideously appealing scent of her blood. If there was only some way to resist…if only another gust of fresh air could clear my head.

Bella Swan shook out her long, thick, mahogany hair in my direction.

Was she insane? It was as if she were encouraging the monster! Taunting him.

There was no friendly breeze to blow the smell away from me now. All would soon be lost.

No, there was no helpful breeze. But I didn't *have* to breathe.

I stopped the flow of air through my lungs; the relief was instantaneous, but incomplete. I still had the memory of the scent in my head, the taste of it on the back of my tongue. I wouldn't be able to resist even that for long. But perhaps I could resist for an hour. One hour. Just enough time to get out of this room full of victims, victims that maybe didn't have to *be* victims. If I could resist for one short hour.

It was an uncomfortable feeling, not breathing. My body did not need oxygen, but it went against my instincts. I relied on scent more than my other senses in times of stress. It led the way in the hunt, it was the first warning in case of danger. I did not often came across something as dangerous as I was, but self-preservation was just as strong in my kind as it was in the average human.

Uncomfortable, but manageable. More bearable than smelling *her* and not sinking my teeth through that fine, thin, see-through skin to the hot, wet, pulsing—

An hour! Just one hour. I must not think of the scent, the taste.

The silent girl kept her hair between us, leaning forward so that it spilled across her folder. I couldn't see her face, to try to read the emotions in her clear, deep eyes. Was this why she'd let her tresses fan out between us? To hide those eyes from me? Out of fear? Shyness? To keep her secrets from me?

My former irritation at being stymied by her soundless thoughts was weak and pale in comparison to the need—and the hate—that possessed me now. For I hated this frail woman-child beside me, hated her with all the fervor with which I clung to my former self, my love of my family, my dreams of being something better than what I was… Hating her, hating how she made me feel—it helped a little. Yes, the irritation I'd felt before was weak, but it, too, helped a little. I clung to any emotion that distracted me from imagining what she would *taste* like…

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Hate and irritation. Impatience. Would the hour never pass?

And when the hour ended… Then she would walk out of this room. And I would do what?

I could introduce myself. *Hello, my name is Edward Cullen. May I walk you to your next class?*

She would say yes. It would be the polite thing to do. Even already fearing me, as I suspected she did, she would follow convention and walk beside me. It should be easy enough to lead her in the wrong direction. A spur of the forest reached out like a finger to touch the back corner of the parking lot. I could tell her I'd forgotten a book in my car…

Would anyone notice that I was the last person she'd been seen with? It was raining, as usual; two dark raincoats heading the wrong direction wouldn't pique too much interest, or give me away.

Except that I was not the only student who was aware of her today—though no one was as blisteringly aware as I was. Mike Newton, in particular, was conscious of every shift in her weight as she fidgeted in her chair—she was uncomfortable so close to me, just as anyone would be, just as I'd expected before her scent had destroyed all charitable concern. Mike Newton would notice if she left the classroom with me.

If I could last an hour, could I last two?

I flinched at the pain of the burning.

She would go home to an empty house. Police Chief Swan worked a full day. I knew his house, as I knew every house in the tiny town. His home was nestled right up against thick woods, with no close neighbors. Even if she had time to scream, which she would not, there would be no one to hear.

That would be the responsible way to deal with this. I'd gone seven decades without human blood. If I held my breath, I could last two hours. And when I had her alone, there would be no chance of anyone else getting hurt. *And no reason to rush through the experience*, the monster in my head agreed.

It was sophistry to think that by saving the nineteen humans in this room with effort and patience, I would be less a monster when I killed this innocent girl.

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Though I hated her, I knew my hatred was unjust. I knew that what I really hated was myself. And I would hate us both so much more when she was dead.

I made it through the hour in this way—imagining the best ways to kill her. I tried to avoid imagining the actual *act*. That might be too much for me; I might lose this battle and end up killing everyone in sight. So I planned strategy, and nothing more. It carried me through the hour.

Once, toward the very end, she peeked up at me through the fluid wall of her hair. I could feel the unjustified hatred burning out of me as I met her gaze—see the reflection of it in her frightened eyes. Blood painted her cheek before she could hide in her hair again, and I was nearly undone.

But the bell rang. Saved by the bell—how cliché. We were both saved. She, saved from death. I, saved for just a short time from being the nightmarish creature I feared and loathed.

I couldn't walk as slowly as I should as I darted from the room. If anyone had been looking at me, they might have suspected that there was something not right about the way I moved. No one was paying attention to me. All human thoughts still swirled around the girl who was condemned to die in little more than an hour's time.

I hid in my car.

I didn't like to think of myself having to hide. How cowardly that sounded. But it was unquestionably the case now.

I didn't have enough discipline left to be around humans now. Focusing so much of my efforts on not killing *one* of them left me no resources to resist the others. What a waste that would be. If I were to give in to the monster, I might as well make it worth the defeat.

I played a CD of music that usually calmed me, but it did little for me now. No, what helped most now was the cool, wet, clean air that drifted with the light rain through my open windows. Though I could remember the scent of Bella Swan's blood with perfect clarity, inhaling the clean air was like washing out the inside of my body from its infection.

I was sane again. I could think again. And I could fight again. I could fight against what I didn't want to be.

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I didn't have to go to her home. I didn't have to kill her. Obviously, I was a rational, thinking creature, and I had a choice. There was always a choice.

It hadn't felt that way in the classroom…but I was away from her now. Perhaps, if I avoided her very, very carefully, there was no need for my life to change. I had things ordered the way I liked them now. Why should I let some aggravating and delicious nobody ruin that?

I didn't *have* to disappoint my father. I didn't have to cause my mother stress, worry…pain. Yes, it would hurt my adopted mother, too. And Esme was so gentle, so tender and soft. Causing someone like Esme pain was truly inexcusable.

How ironic that I'd wanted to protect this human girl from the paltry, toothless threat of Jessica Stanley's snide thoughts. I was the last person who would ever stand as a protector for Isabella Swan. She would never need protection from anything more than she needed it from me.

Where was Alice, I suddenly wondered? Hadn't she seen me killing the Swan girl in a multitude of ways? Why hadn't she come to help—to stop me or help me clean up the evidence, whichever? Was she so absorbed with watching for trouble with Jasper that she'd missed this much more horrific possibility? Was I stronger than I thought? Would I really not have done anything to the girl?

No. I knew that wasn't true. Alice must be concentrating on Jasper very hard.

I searched in the direction I knew she would be, in the small building used for English classes. It did not take me long to locate her familiar 'voice.' And I was right. Her every thought was turned to Jasper, watching his small choices with minute scrutiny.

I wished I could ask her advice, but at the same time, I was glad she didn't know what I was capable of. That she was unaware of the massacre I had considered in the last hour.

I felt a new burn through my body—the burn of shame. I didn't want any of them to know.

If I could avoid Bella Swan, if I could manage not to kill her—even as I thought that, the monster writhed and gnashed his teeth in frustration—then no one would have to know. If I could keep away from her scent…

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There was no reason why I shouldn't try, at least. Make a good choice. Try to be what Carlisle thought I was.

The last hour of school was almost over. I decided to put my new plan into action at once. Better than sitting here in the parking lot where she might pass me and ruin my attempt. Again, I felt the unjust hatred for the girl. I hated that she had this unconscious power over me. That she could make me be something I reviled.

I walked swiftly—a little too swiftly, but there were no witnesses—across the tiny campus to the office. There was no reason for Bella Swan to cross paths with me. She would be avoided like the plague she was.

The office was empty except for the secretary, the one I wanted to see.

She didn't notice my silent entrance.

"Mrs. Cope?"

The woman with the unnaturally red hair looked up and her eyes widened. It always caught them off guard, the little markers they didn't understand, no matter how many times they'd seen one of us before.

"Oh," she gasped, a little flustered. She smoothed her shirt. *Silly,* she thought to herself. *He's almost young enough to be my son. Too young to think of that way…* "Hello, Edward. What can I do for you?" Her eyelashes fluttered behind her thick glasses.

Uncomfortable. But I knew how to be charming when I wanted to be. It was easy, since I was able to know instantly how any tone or gesture was taken.

I leaned forward, meeting her gaze as if I were staring deeply into her depthless, small brown eyes. Her thoughts were already in a flutter. This should be simple.

"I was wondering if you could help me with my schedule," I said in the soft voice I reserved for not scaring humans.

I heard the tempo of her heart increase.

"Of course, Edward. How can I help?" *Too young, too young,* she chanted to herself. Wrong, of course. I was older than her grandfather. But according to my driver's license, she was right.

"I was wondering if I could move from my biology class to a senior level science? Physics, perhaps?"

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"It there a problem with Mr. Banner, Edward?"

"Not at all, it's just that I've already studied this material…"

"In that accelerated school you all went to in Alaska, right." Her thin lips pursed as she considered this. *They should all be in college. I've heard the teachers complain. Perfect four point ohs, never a hesitation with a response, never a wrong answer on a test—like they've found some way to cheat in every subject. Mr. Varner would rather believe that anyone was cheating than think a student was smarter than him… I'll bet their mother tutors them…* "Actually, Edward, physics is pretty much full right now. Mr. Banner hates to have more than twenty-five students in a class—"

"I wouldn't be any trouble."

Of course not. Not a perfect Cullen. "I know that, Edward. But there just aren't enough seats as it is…"

"Could I drop the class, then? I could use the period for independent study."

"Drop biology?" He mouth fell open. *That's crazy. How hard is it to sit through a subject you already know? There* must *be a problem with Mr. Banner. I wonder if I should talk to Bob about it?* "You won't have enough credits to graduate."

"I'll catch up next year."

"Maybe you should talk to your parents about that."

The door opened behind me, but who ever it was did not think of me, so I ignored the arrival and concentrated on Mrs. Cope. I leaned slightly closer, and held my eyes a little wider. This would work better if they were gold instead of black. The blackness frightened people, as it should.

"Please, Mrs. Cope?" I made my voice as smooth and compelling as it could be—and it could be considerably compelling. "Isn't there some other section I could switch to? I'm sure there has to be an open slot somewhere? Sixth hour biology can't be the only option…"

I smiled at her, careful not to flash my teeth so widely that it would scare her, letting the expression soften my face.

Her heart drummed faster. *Too young,* she reminded herself frantically. "Well, maybe I could talk to Bob—I mean Mr. Banner. I could see if—"

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A second was all it took to change everything: the atmosphere in the room, my mission here, the reason I leaned toward the red-haired woman… What had been for one purpose before was now for another.

A second was all it took for Samantha Wells to open the door and place a signed tardy slip in the basket by the door, and hurry out again, in a rush to be away from school. A second was all it took for the sudden gust of wind through the open door to crash into me. A second was all it took for me to realize why that first person through the door had not interrupted me with her thoughts.

I turned, though I did not need to make sure. I turned slowly, fighting to control the muscles that rebelled against me.

Bella Swan stood with her back pressed to the wall beside the door, a piece of paper clutched in her hands. Her eyes were even wider than usual as she took in my ferocious, inhuman glare.

The smell of her blood saturated every particle of air in the tiny, hot room. My throat burst into flames.

The monster glared back at me from the mirror of her eyes again, a mask of evil.

My hand hesitated in the air above the counter. I would not have to look back in order to reach across it and slam Mrs. Cope's head into her desk with enough force to kill her. Two lives, rather than twenty. A trade.

The monster waited anxiously, hungrily, for me to do it.

But there was always a choice—there *had* to be.

I cut off the motion of my lungs, and fixed Carlisle's face in front of my eyes. I turned back to face Mrs. Cope, and heard her internal surprise at the change in my expression. She shrank away from me, but her fear did not form into coherent words.

Using all the control I'd mastered in my decades of self-denial, I made my voice even and smooth. There was just enough air left in my lungs to speak once more, rushing through the words.

"Nevermind, then. I can see that it's impossible. Thank you so much for your help."

I spun and launched myself from the room, trying not to feel the warm-blooded heat of the girl's body as I passed within inches of it.

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I didn't stop until I was in my car, moving too fast the entire way there. Most of the humans had cleared out already, so there weren't a lot of witnesses. I heard a sophomore, D.J. Garrett, notice, and then disregard…

Where did Cullen come from—it was like he just came out of thin air… There I go, with the imagination again. Mom always says…

When I slid into my Volvo, the others were already there. I tried to control my breathing, but I was gasping at the fresh air like I'd been suffocated.

"Edward?" Alice asked, alarm in her voice.

I just shook my head at her.

"What the hell happened to you?" Emmett demanded, distracted, for the moment, from the fact that Jasper was not in the mood for his rematch.

Instead of answering, I threw the car into reverse. I had to get out of this lot before Bella Swan could follow me here, too. My own person demon, haunting me… I swung the car around and accelerated. I hit forty before I was on the road. On the road, I hit seventy before I made the corner.

Without looking, I knew that Emmett, Rosalie and Jasper had all turned to stare at Alice. She shrugged. She couldn't see what had passed, only what was coming.

She looked ahead for me now. We both processed what she saw in her head, and we were both surprised.

"You're leaving?" she whispered.

The others stared at me now.

"Am I?" I hissed through my teeth.

She saw it then, as my resolve wavered and another choice spun my future in a darker direction.

"Oh."

Bella Swan, dead. My eyes, glowing crimson with fresh blood. The search that would follow. The careful time we would wait before it was safe for us to pull out and start again…

"Oh," she said again. The picture grew more specific. I saw the inside of Chief Swan's house for the first time, saw Bella in a small kitchen with the yellow cupboards, her back to me as I stalked her from the shadows…let the scent pull me toward her…

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"Stop!" I groaned, not able to bear more.

"Sorry," she whispered, her eyes wide.

The monster rejoiced.

And the vision in her head shifted again. An empty highway at night, the trees beside it coated in snow, flashing by at almost two hundred miles per hour.

"I'll miss you," she said. "No matter how short a time you're gone."

Emmett and Rosalie exchanged an apprehensive glance.

We were almost to the turn off onto the long drive that led to our home.

"Drop us here," Alice instructed. "You should tell Carlisle yourself."

I nodded, and the car squealed to a sudden stop.

Emmett, Rosalie and Jasper got out in silence; they would make Alice explain when I was gone. Alice touched my shoulder.

"You will do the right thing," she murmured. Not a vision this time—an order. "She's Charlie Swan's only family. It would kill him, too."

"Yes," I said, agreeing only with the last part.

She slid out to join the others, her eyebrows pulling together in anxiety. They melted into woods, out of sight before I could turn the car around.

I accelerated back toward town, and I knew the visions in Alice's head would be flashing from dark to bright like a strobe light. As I sped back to Forks doing ninety, I wasn't sure where I was going. To say goodbye to my father? Or to embrace the monster inside me? The road flew away beneath my tires.

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2. Open Book

I leaned back against the soft snow bank, letting the dry powder reshape itself around my weight. My skin had cooled to match the air around me, and the tiny pieces of ice felt like velvet under my skin.

The sky above me was clear, brilliant with stars, glowing blue in some places, yellow in others. The stars created majestic, swirling shapes against the black universe—an awesome sight. Exquisitely beautiful. Or rather, it should have been exquisite. Would have been, if I'd been able to really see it.

It wasn't getting any better. Six days had passed, six days I'd hidden here in the empty Denali wilderness, but I was no closer to freedom than I had been since the first moment that I'd caught her scent.

When I stared up at the jeweled sky, it was as if there were an obstruction between my eyes and their beauty. The obstruction was a face, just an unremarkable human face, but I couldn't quite seem to banish it from my mind.

I heard the approaching thoughts before I heard the footsteps that accompanied them. The sound of movement was only a faint whisper against the powder.

I was not surprised that Tanya had followed me here. I knew she'd been mulling over this coming conversation for the last few days, putting it off until she was sure of exactly what she wanted to say.

She sprang into sight about sixty yards away, leaping onto the tip of an outcropping of black rock and balancing there on the balls of her bare feet.

Tanya's skin was silver in the starlight, and her long blond curls shone pale, almost pink with their strawberry tint. Her amber eyes glinted as she spied me, half-buried in the snow, and her full lips stretched slowly into a smile.

Exquisite. *If* I'd really been able to see her. I sighed.

She crouched down on the point of the stone, her fingertips touching the rock, her body coiled.

Cannonball, she thought.

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She launched herself into the air; her shape became a dark, twisting shadow as she spun gracefully between me and the stars. She curled herself into a ball just as she struck the piled snow bank beside me.

A blizzard of snow flew up around me. The stars went black and I was buried deep in the feathery ice crystals.

I sighed again, but didn't move to unearth myself. The blackness under the snow neither hurt nor improved the view. I still saw the same face.

"Edward?"

Then snow was flying again as Tanya swiftly disinterred me. She brushed the powder from my unmoving face, not quite meeting my eyes.

"Sorry," she murmured. "It was a joke."

"I know. It was funny."

Her mouth twisted down.

"Irina and Kate said I should leave you alone. They think I'm annoying you."

"Not at all," I assured her. "On the contrary, I'm the one who's being rude—abominably rude. I'm very sorry."

You're going home, aren't you? she thought.

"I haven't…entirely…decided that yet."

But you're not staying here. Her thought was wistful now, sad.

"No. It doesn't seem to be…helping."

She grimaced. "That's my fault, isn't it?"

"Of course not," I lied smoothly.

Don't be a gentleman.

I smiled.

I make you uncomfortable, she accused.

"No."

She raised one eyebrow, her expression so disbelieving that I had to laugh. One short laugh, followed by another sigh.

"All right," I admitted. "A little bit."

She sighed, too, and put her chin in her hands. Her thoughts were chagrined.

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"You're a thousand times lovelier than the stars, Tanya. Of course, you're already well aware of that. Don't let my stubbornness undermine your confidence." I chuckled at the unlikeliness of *that*.

"I'm not used to rejection," she grumbled, her lower lip pushing out into an attractive pout.

"Certainly not," I agreed, trying with little success to block out her thoughts as she fleetingly sifted through memories of her thousands of successful conquests. Mostly Tanya preferred human men—they were much more populous for one thing, with the added advantage of being soft and warm. And always eager, definitely.

"Succubus," I teased, hoping to interrupt the images flickering in her head.

She grinned, flashing her teeth. "The original."

Unlike Carlisle, Tanya and her sisters had discovered their consciences slowly. In the end, it was their fondness for human men that turned the sisters against the slaughter. Now the men they loved…lived.

"When you showed up here," Tanya said slowly. "I thought that…"

I'd known what she'd thought. And I should have guessed that she would have felt that way. But I hadn't been at my best for analytical thinking in that moment.

"You thought that I'd changed my mind."

"Yes." She scowled.

"I feel horrible for toying with your expectations, Tanya. I didn't mean to—I wasn't thinking. It's just that I left in…quite a hurry."

"I don't suppose you'd tell me why…?"

I sat up and wrapped my arms around my legs, curling defensively. "I don't want to talk about it."

Tanya, Irina and Kate were very good at this life they'd committed to. Better, in some ways, than even Carlisle. Despite the insanely close proximity they allowed themselves with those who should be—and once were—their prey, they did not make mistakes. I was too ashamed to admit my weakness to Tanya.

"Woman troubles?" she guessed, ignoring my reluctance.

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I laughed a bleak laugh. "Not the way you mean it."

She was quiet then. I listened to her thoughts as she ran through different guesses, tried to decipher the meaning of my words.

"You're not even close," I told her.

"One hint?" she asked.

"Please let it go, Tanya."

She was quiet again, still speculating. I ignored her, trying in vain to appreciate the stars.

She gave up after a silent moment, and her thoughts pursued a new direction.

Where will you go, Edward, if you leave? Back to Carlisle?

"I don't think so," I whispered.

Where would I go? I could not think of one place on the entire planet that held any interest for me. There was nothing I wanted to see or do. Because, no matter where I went, I would not be going *to* anywhere—I would only be running *from*.

I hated that. When had I become such a coward?

Tanya threw her slender arm around my shoulders. I stiffened, but did not flinch out from under her touch. She meant it as nothing more than friendly comfort. Mostly.

"I think that you *will* go back," she said, her voice taking on just a hint of her long lost Russian accent. "No matter what it is…or who it is...that is haunting you. You'll face it head on. You're the type."

Her thoughts were as certain as her words. I tried to embrace the vision of myself that she carried in her head. The one who faced things head on. It was pleasant to think of myself that way again. I'd never doubted my courage, my ability to face difficulty, before that horrible hour in a high school biology class such a short time ago.

I kissed her cheek, pulling back swiftly when she twisted her face toward mine, her lips already puckered. She smiled ruefully at my quickness.

"Thank you, Tanya. I needed to hear that."

Her thoughts turned petulant. "You're welcome, I guess. I wish you would be more reasonable about things, Edward."

"I'm sorry, Tanya. You know you're too good for me. I just…haven't found what I'm looking for yet."

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"Well, if you leave before I see you again…goodbye, Edward."

"Goodbye, Tanya." As I said the words, I could see it. I could see myself leaving. Being strong enough to go back to the one place where I wanted to be. "Thanks again."

She was on her feet in one nimble move, and then she was running away, ghosting across the snow so quickly that her feet had no time to sink into the snow; she left no prints behind her. She didn't look back. My rejection bothered her more than she'd let on before, even in her thoughts. She wouldn't want to see me again before I left.

My mouth twisted with chagrin. I didn't like hurting Tanya, though her feelings were not deep, hardly pure, and, in any case, not something I could return. It still made me feel less than a gentleman.

I put my chin on my knees and stared up at the stars again, though I was suddenly anxious to be on my way. I knew that Alice would see me coming home, that she would tell the others. This would make them happy—Carlisle and Esme especially. But I gazed at the stars for one more moment, trying to see past the face in my head. Between me and the brilliant lights in the sky, a pair of bewildered chocolate-brown eyes stared back at me, seeming to ask what this decision would mean for *her*. Of course, I couldn't be sure if that was really the information her curious eyes sought. Even in my imagination, I couldn't hear her thoughts. Bella Swan's eyes continued to question, and an unobstructed view of the stars continued to elude me. With a heavy sigh, I gave up, and got to my feet. If I ran, I would be back to Carlisle's car in less than an hour…

In a hurry to see my family—and wanting very much to be the Edward that faced things head on—I raced across the starlit snowfield, leaving no footprints.

"It's going to be okay," Alice breathed. Her eyes were unfocused, and Jasper had one hand lightly under her elbow, guiding her forward as we walked into the rundown cafeteria in a close group. Rosalie and Emmett led the way, Emmett looking ridiculously

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like a bodyguard in the middle of hostile territory. Rose looked wary, too, but much more irritated than protective.

"Of course it is," I grumbled. Their behavior was ludicrous. If I wasn't positive that I could handle this moment, I would have stayed home.

The sudden shift from our normal, even playful morning—it had snowed in the night, and Emmett and Jasper were not above taking advantage of my distraction to bombard me with slushballs; when they got bored with my lack of response, they'd turned on each other—to this overdone vigilance would have been comical if it weren't so irritating.

"She's not here yet, but the way she's going to come in…she won't be downwind if we sit in our regular spot."

"*Of course* we'll sit in our regular spot. Stop it, Alice. You're getting on my nerves. I'll be absolutely fine."

She blinked once as Jasper helped her into her seat, and her eyes finally focused on my face.

"Hmm," she said, sounding surprised. "I think you're right."

"*Of course* I am," I muttered.

I hated being the focus of their concern. I felt a sudden sympathy for Jasper, remembering all the times we'd hovered protectively over him. He met my glance briefly, and grinned.

Annoying, isn't it?

I grimaced at him.

Was it just last week that this long, drab room had seemed so killingly dull to me? That it had seemed almost like sleep, like a coma, to be here?

Today my nerves were stretched tight—piano wires, tensed to sing at the lightest pressure. My senses were hyper-alert; I scanned every sound, every sight, every movement of the air that touched my skin, every thought. Especially the thoughts. There was only one sense that I kept locked down, refused to use. Smell, of course. I didn't breathe.

I was expecting to hear more about the Cullens in the thoughts that I sifted through. All day I'd been waiting, searching for whichever new acquaintance Bella

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Swan might have confided in, trying to see the direction the new gossip would take. But there was nothing. No one noticed the five vampires in the cafeteria, just the same as before the new girl had come. Several of the humans here were still thinking of that girl, still thinking the same thoughts from last week. Instead of finding this unutterably boring, I was now fascinated.

Had she said nothing to anyone about me?

There was no way that she had not noticed my black, murderous glare. I had seen her react to it. Surely, I'd scared her silly. I had been convinced that she would have mentioned it to someone, maybe even exaggerated the story a bit to make it better. Given me a few menacing lines.

And then, she'd also heard me trying to get out of our shared biology class. She must have wondered, after seeing my expression, whether she were the cause. A normal girl would have asked around, compared her experience to others, looked for common ground that would explain my behavior so she didn't feel singled out. Humans were constantly desperate to feel normal, to fit in. To blend in with everyone else around them, like a featureless flock of sheep. The need was particularly strong during the insecure adolescent years. This girl would be no exception to that rule.

But no one at all took any notice of us sitting here, at our normal table. Bella must be exceptionally shy, if she'd confided in no one. Perhaps she had spoken to her father, maybe that was the strongest relationship…though that seemed unlikely, given the fact that she had spent so little time with him throughout her life. She would be closer to her mother. Still, I would have to pass by Chief Swan sometime soon and listen to what he was thinking.

"Anything new?" Jasper asked.

"Nothing. She…must not have said anything."

All of them raised an eyebrow at this news.

"Maybe you're not as scary as you think you are," Emmett said, chuckling. "I bet I could have frightened her better than *that*."

I rolled my eyes at him.

"Wonder why…?" He puzzled again over my revelation about the girl's unique silence.

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"We've been over that. I don't *know*."

"She's coming in," Alice murmured then. I felt my body go rigid. "Try to look human."

"Human, you say?" Emmett asked.

He held up his right fist, twisting his fingers to reveal the snowball he'd saved in his palm. Of course it had not melted there. He'd squeezed it into a lumpy block of ice. He had his eyes on Jasper, but I saw the direction of his thoughts. So did Alice, of course. When he abruptly hurled the ice chunk at her, she flicked it away with a casual flutter of her fingers. The ice ricocheted across the length of the cafeteria, too fast to be visible to human eyes, and shattered with a sharp crack against the brick wall. The brick cracked, too.

The heads in that corner of the room all turned to stare at the pile of broken ice on the floor, and then swiveled to find the culprit. They didn't look further than a few tables away. No one looked at us.

"Very human, Emmett," Rosalie said scathingly. "Why don't you punch through the wall while you're at it?"

"It would look more impressive if you did it, baby."

I tried to pay attention to them, keeping a grin fixed on my face like I was part of their banter. I did not allow myself to look toward the line where I knew she was standing. But that was all that I was listening to.

I could hear Jessica's impatience with the new girl, who seemed to be distracted, too, standing motionless in the moving line. I saw, in Jessica's thoughts, that Bella Swan's cheeks were once more colored bright pink with blood.

I pulled in short, shallow breaths, ready to quit breathing if any hint of her scent touched the air near me.

Mike Newton was with the two girls. I heard both his voices, mental and verbal, when he asked Jessica what was wrong with the Swan girl. I didn't like the way his thoughts wrapped around her, the flicker of already established fantasies that clouded his mind while he watched her start and look up from her reverie like she'd forgotten he was there.

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"Nothing," I heard Bella say in that quiet, clear voice. It seemed to ring like a bell over the babble in the cafeteria, but I knew that was just because I was listening for it so intently.

"I'll just get a soda today," she continued as she moved to catch up with the line.

I couldn't help flickering one glance in her direction. She was staring at the floor, the blood slowly fading from her face. I looked away quickly, to Emmett, who laughed at the now pained-looking smile on my face.

You look sick, bro.

I rearranged my features so the expression would seem casual and effortless.

Jessica was wondering aloud about the girl's lack of appetite. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Actually, I feel a little sick." Her voice was lower, but still very clear.

Why did it bother me, the protective concern that suddenly emanated from Mike Newton's thoughts? What did it matter that there was a possessive edge to them? It wasn't my business if Mike Newton felt unnecessarily anxious for her. Perhaps this was the way everyone responded to her. Hadn't I wanted, instinctively, to protect her, too? Before I'd wanted to kill her, that is…

But *was* the girl ill?

It was hard to judge—she looked so delicate with her translucent skin… Then I realized that I was worrying, too, just like that dimwitted boy, and I forced myself not to think about her health.

Regardless, I didn't like monitoring her through Mike's thoughts. I switched to Jessica's, watching carefully as the three of them chose which table to sit at. Fortunately, they sat with Jessica's usual companions, at one of the first tables in the room. Not downwind, just as Alice had promised.

Alice elbowed me. *She's going to look soon, act human.*

I clenched my teeth behind my grin.

"Ease up, Edward," Emmett said. "Honestly. So you kill one human. That's hardly the end of the world."

"You would know," I murmured.

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Emmett laughed. "You've got to learn to get over things. Like I do. Eternity is a long time to wallow in guilt."

Just then, Alice tossed a smaller handful of ice that she'd been hiding into Emmett's unsuspecting face.

He blinked, surprised, and then grinned in anticipation.

"You asked for it," he said as he leaned across the table and shook his ice-encrusted hair in her direction. The snow, melting in the warm room, flew out from his hair in a thick shower of half-liquid, half-ice.

"Ew!" Rose complained, as she and Alice recoiled from the deluge.

Alice laughed, and we all joined in. I could see in Alice's head how she'd orchestrated this perfect moment, and I knew that the girl—I should stop thinking of her that way, as if she were the only girl in the world—that *Bella* would be watching us laugh and play, looking as happy and human and unrealistically ideal as a Norman Rockwell painting.

Alice kept laughing, and held her tray up as a shield. The girl—Bella must still be staring at us.

...staring at the Cullens again, someone thought, catching my attention.

I looked automatically toward the unintentional call, realizing as my eyes found their destination that I recognized the voice—I'd been listening to it so much today.

But my eyes slid right past Jessica, and focused on the girl's penetrating gaze.

She looked down quickly, hiding behind her thick hair again.

What was she thinking? The frustration seemed to be getting more acute as time went on, rather than dulling. I tried—uncertain in what I was doing for I'd never tried this before—to probe with my mind at the silence around her. My extra hearing had always come to me naturally, without asking; I'd never had to work at it. But I concentrated now, trying to break through whatever shield surrounded her.

Nothing but silence.

What is *it about her?* Jessica thought, echoing my own frustration.

"Edward Cullen is staring at you," she whispered in the Swan girl's ear, adding a giggle. There was no hint of her jealous irritation in her tone. Jessica seemed to be skilled at feigning friendship.

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I listened, too engrossed, to the girl's response.

"He doesn't look angry, does he?" she whispered back.

So she *had* noticed my wild reaction last week. Of course she had.

The question confused Jessica. I saw my own face in her thoughts as she checked my expression, but I did not meet her glance. I was still concentrating on the girl, trying to hear *something*. My intent focus didn't seem to be helping at all.

"No," Jess told her, and I knew that she wished she could say yes—how it rankled inside her, my staring—though there was no trace of that in her voice. "Should he be?"

"I don't think he likes me," the girl whispered back, laying her head down on her arm as if she were suddenly tired. I tried to understand the motion, but I could only make guesses. Maybe she *was* tired.

"The Cullens don't like anybody," Jess reassured her. "Well, they don't notice anybody enough to like them." *They never used to.* Her thought was a grumble of complaint. "But he's still staring at you."

"Stop looking at him," the girl said anxiously, lifting her head from her arm to make sure Jessica obeyed the order.

Jessica giggled, but did as she was asked.

The girl did not look away from her table for the rest of the hour. I thought—though, of course, I could not be sure—that this was deliberate. It seemed like she wanted to look at me. Her body would shift slightly in my direction, her chin would begin to turn, and then she would catch herself, take a deep breath, and stare fixedly at whoever was speaking.

I ignored the other thoughts around the girl for the most part, as they were not, momentarily, about her. Mike Newton was planning a snow fight in the parking lot after school, not seeming to realize that the snow had already shifted to rain. The flutter of soft flakes against the roof had become the more common patter of raindrops. Could he really not hear the change? It seemed loud to me.

When the lunch period ended, I stayed in my seat. The humans filed out, and I caught myself trying to distinguish the sound of her footsteps from the sound of the rest, as if there was something important or unusual about them. How stupid.

My family made no move to leave, either. They waited to see what I would do.

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Would I go to class, sit beside the girl where I could smell the absurdly potent scent of her blood and feel the warmth of her pulse in the air on my skin? Was I strong enough for that? Or had I had enough for one day?

"I…*think* it's okay," Alice said, hesitant. "Your mind is set. I *think* you'll make it through the hour."

But Alice knew well how quickly a mind could change.

"Why push it, Edward?" Jasper asked. Though he didn't want to feel smug that I was the one who was weak now, I could hear that he did, just a little. "Go home. Take it slow."

"What's the big deal?" Emmett disagreed. "Either he will or he won't kill her. Might as well get it over with, either way."

"I don't want to move yet," Rosalie complained. "I don't want to start over. We're almost out of high school, Emmett. *Finally*."

I was evenly torn on the decision. I wanted, wanted badly, to face this head on rather than running away again. But I didn't want to push myself too far, either. It had been a mistake last week for Jasper to go so long without hunting; was this just as pointless a mistake?

I didn't want to uproot my family. None of them would thank me for that.

But I wanted to go to my biology class. I realized that I wanted to see her face again.

That's what decided it for me. That curiosity. I was angry with myself for feeling it. Hadn't I promised myself that I wouldn't let the silence of the girl's mind make me unduly interested in her? And yet, here I was, most unduly interested.

I wanted to know what she was thinking. Her mind was closed, but her eyes were very open. Perhaps I could read them instead.

"No, Rose, I think it really will be okay," Alice said. "It's…firming up. I'm ninety-three percent sure that nothing bad will happen if he goes to class." She looked at me inquisitively, wondering what had changed in my thoughts that made her vision of the future more secure.

Would curiosity be enough to keep Bella Swan alive?

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Emmett was right, though—why not get it over with, either way? I would face the temptation head on.

"Go to class," I ordered, pushing away from the table. I turned and strode away from them without looking back. I could hear Alice's worry, Jasper's censure, Emmett's approval, and Rosalie's irritation trailing after me.

I took one last deep breath at the door of the classroom, and then held it in my lungs as I walked into the small, warm space.

I was not late. Mr. Banner was still setting up for today's lab. The girl sat at my—at *our* table, her face down again, staring at the folder she was doodling on. I examined the sketch as I approached, interested in even this trivial creation of her mind, but it was meaningless. Just a random scribbling of loops within loops. Perhaps she was not concentrating on the pattern, but thinking of something else?

I pulled my chair back with unnecessary roughness, letting it scrape across the linoleum; humans always felt more comfortable when noise announced someone's approach.

I knew she heard the sound; she did not look up, but her hand missed a loop in the design she was drawing, making it unbalanced.

Why didn't she look up? Probably she was frightened. I must be sure to leave her with a different impression this time. Make her think she'd been imagining things before.

"Hello," I said in the quiet voice I used when I wanted to make humans more comfortable, forming a polite smile with my lips that would not show any teeth.

She looked up then, her wide brown eyes startled—almost bewildered—and full of silent questions. It was the same expression that had been obstructing my vision for the last week.

As I stared into those oddly deep brown eyes, I realized that the hate—the hate I'd imagined this girl somehow deserved for simply existing—had evaporated. Not breathing now, not tasting her scent, it was hard to believe that anyone so vulnerable could ever justify hatred.

Her cheeks began to flush, and she said nothing.

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I kept my eyes on hers, focusing only on their questioning depths, and tried to ignore the appetizing color of her skin. I had enough breath to speak for a while longer without inhaling.

"My name is Edward Cullen," I said, though I knew she knew that. It was the polite way to begin. "I didn't have a chance to introduce myself last week. You must be Bella Swan."

She seemed confused—there was that little pucker between her eyes again. It took her half a second longer than it should have for her to respond.

"How do you know my name?" she demanded, and her voice shook just a little.

I must have truly terrified her. This made me feel guilty; she was just so defenseless. I laughed gently—it was a sound that I knew made humans more at ease. Again, I was careful about my teeth.

"Oh, I think everyone knows your name." Surely she must have realized that she'd become the center of attention in this monotonous place. "The whole town's been waiting for you to arrive."

She frowned as if this information was unpleasant. I supposed, being shy as she seemed to be, attention would seem like a bad thing to her. Most humans felt the opposite. Though they didn't want to stand out from the herd, at the same time they craved a spotlight for their individual uniformity.

"No," she said. "I meant, why did you call me Bella?"

"Do you prefer Isabella?" I asked, perplexed by the fact that I couldn't see where this question was leading. I didn't understand. Surely, she'd made her preference clear many times that first day. Were all humans this incomprehensible without the mental context as a guide?

"No, I like Bella," she answered, leaning her head slightly to one side. Her expression—if I was reading it correctly—was torn between embarrassment and confusion. "But I think Charlie—I mean my dad—must call me Isabella behind my back. That's what everyone here seems to know me as." Her skin darkened one shade pinker.

"Oh," I said lamely, and quickly looked away from her face.

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I'd just realized what her questions meant: I had slipped up—made an error. If I hadn't been eavesdropping on all the others that first day, then I would have addressed her initially by her full name, just like everyone else. She'd noticed the difference.

I felt a pang of unease. It was very quick of her to pick up on my slip. Quite astute, especially for someone who was supposed to be terrified by my nearness.

But I had bigger problems than whatever suspicions about me she might be keeping locked inside her head.

I was out of air. If I were going to speak to her again, I would have to inhale.

It would be hard to avoid speaking. Unfortunately for her, sharing this table made her my lab partner, and we would have to work together today. It would seem odd—and incomprehensibly rude—for me to ignore her while we did the lab. It would make her more suspicious, more afraid…

I leaned as far away from her as I could without moving my seat, twisting my head out into the aisle. I braced myself, locking my muscles in place, and then sucked in one quick chest-full of air, breathing through my mouth alone.

Ahh!

It was genuinely painful. Even without smelling her, I could taste her on my tongue. My throat was suddenly in flames again, the craving every bit as strong as that first moment I'd caught her scent last week.

I gritted my teeth together and tried to compose myself.

"Get started," Mr. Banner commanded.

It felt like it took every single ounce of self-control that I'd achieved in seventy years of hard work to turn back to the girl, who was staring down at the table, and smile.

"Ladies first, partner?" I offered.

She looked up at my expression and her face went blank, her eyes wide. Was there something off in my expression? Was she frightened again? She didn't speak.

"Or, I could start, if you wish," I said quietly.

"No," she said, and her face went from white to red again. "I'll go first."

I stared at the equipment on the table, the battered microscope, the box of slides, rather than watch the blood swirl under her clear skin. I took another quick breath, through my teeth, and winced as the taste made my throat ache.

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"Prophase," she said after a quick examination. She started to remove the slide, though she'd barely examined it.

"Do you mind if I look?" Instinctively—stupidly, as if I were one of her kind—I reached out to stop her hand from removing the slide. For one second, the heat of her skin burned into mine. It was like an electric pulse—surely much hotter than a mere ninety-eight point six degrees. The heat shot through my hand and up my arm. She yanked her hand out from under mine.

"I'm sorry," I muttered through my clenched teeth. Needing somewhere to look, I grasped the microscope and stared briefly into the eyepiece. She was right.

"Prophase," I agreed.

I was still too unsettled to look at her. Breathing as quietly as I could through my gritted teeth and trying to ignore the fiery thirst, I concentrated on the simple assignment, writing the word on the appropriate line on the lab sheet, and then switching out the first slide for the next.

What was she thinking now? What had that felt like to her, when I had touched her hand? My skin must have been ice cold—repulsive. No wonder she was so quiet.

I glanced at the slide.

"Anaphase," I said to myself as I wrote it on the second line.

"May I?" she asked.

I looked up at her, surprised to see that she was waiting expectantly, one hand half-stretched toward the microscope. She didn't *look* afraid. Did she really think I'd gotten the answer wrong?

I couldn't help but smile at the hopeful look on her face as I slid the microscope toward her.

She stared into the eyepiece with an eagerness that quickly faded. The corners of her mouth turned down.

"Slide three?" she asked, not looking up from the microscope, but holding out her hand. I dropped the next slide into her hand, not letting my skin come anywhere close to hers this time. Sitting beside her was like sitting next to a heat lamp. I could feel myself warming slightly to the higher temperature.

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She did not look at the slide for long. "Interphase," she said nonchalantly—perhaps trying a little too hard to sound that way—and pushed the microscope to me. She did not touch the paper, but waited for me to write the answer. I checked—she was correct again.

We finished this way, speaking one word at a time and never meeting each other's eyes. We were the only ones done—the others in the class were having a harder time with the lab. Mike Newton seemed to be having trouble concentrating—he was trying to watch Bella and me.

Wish he'd stayed wherever he went, Mike thought, eyeing me sulfurously. Hmm, interesting. I hadn't realized the boy harbored any ill will towards me. This was a new development, about as recent as the girl's arrival it seemed. Even more interesting, I found—to my surprise—that the feeling was mutual.

I looked down at the girl again, bemused by the wide range of havoc and upheaval that, despite her ordinary, unthreatening appearance, she was wreaking on my life.

It wasn't that I couldn't see what Mike was going on about. She was actually rather pretty…in an unusual way. Better than being beautiful, her face was *interesting*. Not quite symmetrical—her narrow chin out of balance with her wide cheekbones; extreme in the coloring—the light and dark contrast of her skin and her hair; and then there were the eyes, brimming over with silent secrets…

Eyes that were suddenly boring into mine.

I stared back at her, trying to guess even one of those secrets.

"Did you get contacts?" she asked abruptly.

What a strange question. "No." I almost smiled at the idea of improving *my* eyesight.

"Oh," she mumbled. "I thought there was something different about your eyes."

I felt suddenly colder again as I realized that I was apparently not the only one attempting to ferret out secrets today.

I shrugged, my shoulders stiff, and glared straight ahead to where the teacher was making his rounds.

Of course there was something different about my eyes since the last time she'd stared into them. To prepare myself for today's ordeal, today's temptation, I'd spent the

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entire weekend hunting, satiating my thirst as much as possible, overdoing it really. I'd glutted myself on the blood of animals, not that it made much difference in the face of the outrageous flavor floating on the air around her. When I'd glared at her last, my eyes had been black with thirst. Now, my body swimming with blood, my eyes were a warmer gold. Light amber from my excessive attempt at thirst-quenching.

Another slip. If I'd seen what she'd meant with her question, I could have just told her yes.

I'd sat beside humans for two years now at this school, and she was the first to examine me closely enough to note the change in my eye color. The others, while admiring the beauty of my family, tended to look down quickly when we returned their stares. They shied away, blocking the details of our appearances in an instinctive endeavor to keep themselves from understanding. Ignorance was bliss to the human mind.

Why did it have to be this girl who would see too much?

Mr. Banner approached our table. I gratefully inhaled the gush of clean air he brought with him before it could mix with her scent.

"So, Edward," he said, looking over our answers, "didn't you think Isabella should get a chance with the microscope?"

"Bella," I corrected him reflexively. "Actually, she identified three of the five."

Mr. Banner's thoughts were skeptical as he turned to look at the girl. "Have you done this lab before?"

I watched, engrossed, as she smiled, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Not with onion root."

"Whitefish blastula?" Mr. Banner probed.

"Yeah."

This surprised him. Today's lab was something he'd pulled from a more advanced course. He nodded thoughtfully at the girl. "Were you in an advanced placement program in Phoenix?"

"Yes."

She was advanced then, intelligent for a human. This did not surprise me.

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"Well," Mr. Banner said, pursing his lips. "I guess it's good you two are lab partners." He turned and walked away mumbling, "So the other kids can get a chance to learn something for themselves," under his breath. I doubted the girl could hear that. She began scrawling loops across her folder again.

Two slips so far in one half hour. A very poor showing on my part. Though I had no idea at all what the girl thought of me—how much did she fear, how much did she suspect?—I knew I needed to put forth a better effort to leave her with a new impression of me. Something to better drown her memories of our ferocious last encounter.

"It's too bad about the snow, isn't it?" I said, repeating the small talk that I'd heard a dozen students discuss already. A boring, standard topic of conversation. The weather—always safe.

She stared at me with obvious doubt in her eyes—an abnormal reaction to my very normal words. "Not really," she said, surprising me again.

I tried to steer the conversation back to trite paths. She was from a much brighter, warmer place—her skin seemed to reflect that somehow, despite its fairness—and the cold must make her uncomfortable. My icy touch certainly had…

"You don't like the cold," I guessed.

"Or the wet," she agreed.

"Forks must be a difficult place for you to live." *Perhaps you should not have come here,* I wanted to add. *Perhaps you should go back where you belong.*

I wasn't sure I wanted that, though. I would always remember the scent of her blood—was there any guarantee that I wouldn't eventually follow after her? Besides, if she left, her mind would forever remain a mystery. A constant, nagging puzzle.

"You have no idea," she said in a low voice, glowering past me for a moment.

Her answers were never what I expected. They made me want to ask more questions.

"Why did you come here, then?" I demanded, realizing instantly that my tone was too accusatory, not casual enough for the conversation. The question sounded rude, prying.

"It's…complicated."

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She blinked her wide eyes, leaving it at that, and I nearly imploded out of curiosity—the curiosity burned as hot as the thirst in my throat. Actually, I found that it was getting slightly easier to breathe; the agony was becoming more bearable through familiarity.

"I think I can keep up," I insisted. Perhaps common courtesy would keep her answering my questions as long as I was rude enough to ask them.

She stared down silently at her hands. This made me impatient; I wanted to put my hand under her chin and tilt her head up so that I could read her eyes. But it would be foolish of me—dangerous—to touch her skin again.

She looked up suddenly. It was a relief to be able to see the emotions in her eyes again. She spoke in a rush, hurrying through the words.

"My mother got remarried."

Ah, this was human enough, easy to understand. Sadness passed through her clear eyes and brought the pucker back between them.

"That doesn't sound so complex," I said. My voice was gentle without my working to make it that way. Her sadness left me feeling oddly helpless, wishing there was something I could do to make her feel better. A strange impulse. "When did that happen?"

"Last September." She exhaled heavily—not quite a sigh. I held my breath as her warm breath brushed my face.

"And you don't like him," I guessed, fishing for more information.

"No, Phil is fine," she said, correcting my assumption. There was a hint of a smile now around the corners of her full lips. "Too young, maybe, but nice enough."

This didn't fit with the scenario I'd been constructing in my head.

"Why didn't you stay with them?" I asked, my voice a little too curious. It sounded like I was being nosy. Which I was, admittedly.

"Phil travels a lot. He plays ball for a living." The little smile grew more pronounced; this career choice amused her.

I smiled, too, without choosing to. I wasn't trying to make her feel at ease. Her smile just made me want to smile in response—to be in on the secret.

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"Have I heard of him?" I ran through the rosters of professional ball players in my head, wondering which Phil was hers…

"Probably not. He doesn't play *well*." Another smile. "Strictly minor league. He moves around a lot."

The rosters in my head shifted instantly, and I'd tabulated a list of possibilities in less than a second. At the same time, I was imagining the new scenario.

"And your mother sent you here so that she could travel with him," I said. Making assumptions seemed to get more information out of her than questions did. It worked again. Her chin jutted out, and her expression was suddenly stubborn.

"No, she did not send me here," she said, and her voice had a new, hard edge to it. My assumption had upset her, though I couldn't quite see how. "I sent myself."

I could not guess at her meaning, or the source behind her pique. I was entirely lost.

So I gave up. There was just no making sense of the girl. She wasn't like other humans. Maybe the silence of her thoughts and the perfume of her scent were not the only unusual things about her.

"I don't understand," I admitted, hating to concede.

She sighed, and stared into my eyes for longer than most normal humans were able to stand.

"She stayed with me at first, but she missed him," she explained slowly, her tone growing more forlorn with each word. "It made her unhappy…so I decided it was time to spend some quality time with Charlie."

The tiny pucker between her eyes deepened.

"But now you're unhappy," I murmured. I couldn't seem to stop speaking my hypotheses aloud, hoping to learn from her reactions. This one, however, did not seem as far off the mark.

"And?" she said, as if this was not even an aspect to be considered.

I continued to stare into her eyes, feeling that I'd finally gotten my first real glimpse into her soul. I saw in that one word where she ranked herself among her own priorities. Unlike most humans, her own needs were far down the list.

She was selfless.

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As I saw this, the mystery of the person hiding inside this quiet mind began to thin a little.

"That doesn't seem fair," I said. I shrugged, trying to seem casual, trying to conceal the intensity of my curiosity.

She laughed, but there was no amusement the sound. "Hasn't anyone ever told you? Life isn't fair."

I wanted to laugh at her words, though I, too, felt no real amusement. I knew a little something about the unfairness of life. "I believe I *have* heard that somewhere before."

She stared back at me, seeming confused again. Her eyes flickered away, and then came back to mine.

"So that's all," she told me.

But I was not ready to let this conversation end. The little V between her eyes, a remnant of her sorrow, bothered me. I wanted to smooth it away with my fingertip. But, of course, I could not touch her. It was unsafe in so many ways.

"You put on a good show." I spoke slowly, still considering this next hypothesis. "But I'd be willing to bet that you're suffering more than you let anyone see."

She made a face, her eyes narrowing and her mouth twisting into a lopsided pout, and she looked back towards the front of the class. She didn't like it when I guessed right. She wasn't the average martyr—she didn't want an audience to her pain.

"Am I wrong?"

She flinched slightly, but otherwise pretended not to hear me.

That made me smile. "I didn't think so."

"Why does it matter to you?" she demanded, still staring away.

"That's a very good question," I admitted, more to myself than to answer her.

Her discernment was better than mine—she saw right to the core of things while I floundered around the edges, sifting blindly through clues. The details of her very human life should *not* matter to me. It was wrong for me to care what she thought. Beyond protecting my family from suspicion, human thoughts were not significant.

I was not used to being the less intuitive of any pairing. I relied on my extra hearing too much—I clearly was not as perceptive as I gave myself credit for.

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The girl sighed and glowered toward the front of the classroom. Something about her frustrated expression was humorous. The whole situation, the whole conversation was humorous. No one had ever been in more danger from me than this little girl—at any moment I might, distracted by my ridiculous absorption in the conversation, inhale through my nose and attack her before I could stop myself—and *she* was irritated because I hadn't answered her question.

"Am I annoying you?" I asked, smiling at the absurdity of it all.

She glanced at me quickly, and then her eyes seemed to get trapped by my gaze.

"Not exactly," she told me. "I'm more annoyed at myself. My face is so easy to read—my mother always calls me her open book."

She frowned, disgruntled.

I stared at her in amazement. The reason she was upset was because she thought I saw through her *too easily*. How bizarre. I'd never expended so much effort to understand someone in all my life—or rather existence, as *life* was hardly the right word. I did not truly have a *life*.

"On the contrary," I disagreed, feeling strangely…wary, as if there were some hidden danger here that I was failing to see. I was suddenly on edge, the premonition making me anxious. "I find you very difficult to read."

"You must be a good reader then," she guessed, making her own assumption that was, again, right on target.

"Usually," I agreed.

I smiled at her widely then, letting my lips pull back to expose the rows of gleaming, razor sharp teeth behind them.

It was a stupid thing to do, but I was abruptly, unexpectedly desperate to get some kind of warning through to the girl. Her body was closer to me than before, having shifted unconsciously in the course of our conversation. All the little markers and signs that were sufficient to scare off the rest of humanity did not seem to be working on her. Why did she not cringe away from me in terror? Surely she had seen enough of my darker side to realize the danger, intuitive as she seemed to be.

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I didn't get to see if my warning had the intended effect. Mr. Banner called for the class's attention just then, and she turned away from me at once. She seemed a little relieved for the interruption, so maybe she understood unconsciously.

I hoped she did.

I recognized the fascination growing inside me, even as I tried to root it out. I could not afford to find Bella Swan interesting. Or rather, *she* could not afford that. Already, I was anxious for another chance to talk to her. I wanted to know more about her mother, her life before she came here, her relationship with her father. All the meaningless details that would flesh out her character further. But every second I spent with her was a mistake, a risk she shouldn't have to take.

Absentmindedly, she tossed her thick hair just at the moment that I allowed myself another breath. A particularly concentrated wave of her scent hit the back of my throat.

It was like the first day—like the wrecking ball. The pain of the burning dryness made me dizzy. I had to grasp the table again to keep myself in my seat. This time I had slightly more control. I didn't break anything, at least. The monster growled inside me, but took no pleasure in my pain. He was too tightly bound. For the moment.

I stopped breathing altogether, and leaned as far from the girl as I could.

No, I could not afford to find her fascinating. The more interesting I found her, the more likely it was that I would kill her. I'd already made two minor slips today. Would I make a third, one that was *not* minor?

As soon as the bell sounded, I fled from the classroom—probably destroying whatever impression of politeness I'd halfway constructed in the course of the hour. Again, I gasped at the clean, wet air outside like it was a healing attar. I hurried to put as much distance between myself and the girl as was possible.

Emmett waited for me outside the door of our Spanish class. He read my wild expression for a moment.

How did it go? he wondered warily.

"Nobody died," I mumbled.

I guess that's something. When I saw Alice ditching there at the end, I thought…

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As we walked into the classroom, I saw his memory from just a few moments ago, seen through the open door of his last class: Alice walking briskly and blank-faced across the grounds toward the science building. I felt his remembered urge to get up and join her, and then his decision to stay. If Alice needed his help, she would ask…

I closed my eyes in horror and disgust as I slumped into my seat. "I hadn't realized that it was that close. I didn't think I was going to…I didn't see that it was that bad," I whispered.

It wasn't, he reassured me. *Nobody died, right?*

"Right," I said through my teeth. "Not this time."

Maybe it will get easier.

"Sure."

Or, maybe you kill her. He shrugged. *You wouldn't be the first one to mess up. No one would judge you too harshly. Sometimes a person just smells too good. I'm impressed you've lasted this long.*

"Not helping, Emmett."

I was revolted by his acceptance of the idea that I would kill the girl, that this was somehow inevitable. Was it her fault that she smelled so good?

I know when it happened to me…, he reminisced, taking me back with him half a century, to a country lane at dusk, where a middle-aged women was taking her dried sheets down from a line strung between apple trees. The scent of apples hung heavy in the air—the harvest was over and the rejected fruits were scattered on the ground, the bruises in their skin leaking their fragrance out in thick clouds. A fresh-mowed field of hay was a background to that scent, a harmony. He walked up the lane, all but oblivious to the woman, on an errand for Rosalie. The sky was purple overhead, orange over the western trees. He would have continued up the meandering cart path and there would have been no reason to remember the evening, except that a sudden night breeze blew the white sheets out like sails and fanned the woman's scent across Emmett's face.

"Ah," I groaned quietly. As if my own remembered thirst was not enough.

I know. I didn't last half a second. I didn't even think about resisting.

His memory became far too explicit for me to stand.

I jumped to my feet, my teeth locked hard enough cut through steel.

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"Esta bien, Edward?" Senora Goff asked, startled by my sudden movement. I could see my face in her mind, and I knew that I looked far from well.

"Me perdona," I muttered, as I darted for the door.

"Emmett—por favor, puedas tu ayuda a tu hermano?" she asked, gesturing helplessly toward me as I rushed out of the room.

"Sure," I heard him say. And then he was right behind me.

He followed me to the far side of the building, where he caught up to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

I shoved his hand away with unnecessary force. It would have shattered the bones in a human hand, and the bones in the arm attached to it.

"Sorry, Edward."

"I know." I drew in deep gasps of air, trying to clear my head and my lungs.

"Is it as bad as that?" he asked, trying not to think of the scent and the flavor of his memory as he asked, and not quite succeeding.

"Worse, Emmett, worse."

He was quiet for a moment.

Maybe…

"No, it would not be better if I got it over with. Go back to class, Emmett. I want to be alone."

He turned without another word or thought and walked quickly away. He would tell the Spanish teacher that I was sick, or ditching, or a dangerously out of control vampire. Did his excuse really matter? Maybe I wasn't coming back. Maybe I had to leave.

I went to my car again, to wait for school to end. To hide. Again.

I should have spent the time making decisions or trying to bolster my resolve, but, like an addict, I found myself searching through the babble of thoughts emanating from the school buildings. The familiar voices stood out, but I wasn't interested in listening to Alice's visions or Rosalie's complaints right now. I found Jessica easily, but the girl was not with her, so I continued searching. Mike Newton's thoughts caught my attention, and I located her at last, in gym with him. He was unhappy, because I'd spoken to her today in biology. He was running over her response when he'd brought the subject up…

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I've never seen him actually talk to anyone for more than a word here or there. Of course he would decide to find Bella interesting. I don't like the way he looks at her. But she didn't seem too excited about him. What did she say? 'Wonder what was with him last Monday.' Something like that. Didn't sound like she cared. It couldn't have been much of a conversation…

He talked himself out of his pessimism in that way, cheered by the idea that Bella had not been interested in her exchange with me. This annoyed me quite a bit more than was acceptable, so I stopped listening to him.

I put a CD of violent music into the stereo, and then turned it up until it drowned out other voices. I had to concentrate on the music very hard to keep myself from drifting back to Mike Newton's thoughts, to spy on the unsuspecting girl…

I cheated a few times, as the hour drew to a close. Not spying, I tried to convince myself. I was just preparing. I wanted to know exactly when she would leave the gym, when she would be in the parking lot. I didn't want her to take me by surprise.

As the students started to file out of the gym doors, I got out of my car, not sure why I did it. The rain was light—I ignored it as it slowly saturated my hair.

Did I want her to see me here? Did I hope she would come to speak to me? What was I doing?

I didn't move, though I tried to convince myself to get back in the car, knowing my behavior was reprehensible. I kept my arms folded across my chest and breathed very shallowly as I watched her walk slowly toward me, her mouth turning down at the corners. She didn't look at me. A few times she glanced up at the clouds with a grimace, as if they offended her.

I was disappointed when she reached her car before she had to pass me. Would she have spoken to me? Would I have spoken to her?

She got into a faded red Chevy truck, a rusted behemoth that was older than her father. I watched her start the truck—the old engine roared louder than any other vehicle in the lot—and then hold her hands out toward the heating vents. The cold was uncomfortable to her—she didn't like it. She combed her fingers through her thick hair, pulling locks through the stream of hot air like she was trying to dry them. I imagined what the cab of that truck would smell like, and then quickly drove out the thought.

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She glanced around as she prepared to back out, and finally looked in my direction. She stared back at me for only half a second, and all I could read in her eyes was surprise before she tore her eyes away and jerked the truck into reverse. And then squealed to a stop again, the back end of the truck missing a collision with Erin Teague's compact by mere inches.

She stared into her rearview mirror, her mouth hanging open with chagrin. When the other car had pulled past her, she checked all her blind spots twice and then inched out the parking space so cautiously that it made me grin. It was like she thought she was *dangerous* in her decrepit truck.

The thought of Bella Swan being dangerous to anyone, no matter what she was driving, had me laughing while the girl drove past me, staring straight ahead.

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3. Phenomenon

Truly, I was not thirsty, but I decided to hunt again that night. A small ounce of prevention, inadequate though I knew it to be.

Carlisle came with me; we hadn't been alone together since I'd returned from Denali. As we ran through the black forest, I heard him thinking about that hasty goodbye last week.

In his memory, I saw the way my features had been twisted in fierce despair. I felt his surprise and sudden worry.

"Edward?"

"I have to go, Carlisle. I have to go now.*"*

"What's happened?"

"Nothing. Yet. But it will, if I stay."

He'd reached for my arm. I felt how it had hurt him when I'd cringed away from his hand.

"I don't understand."

"Have you ever…has there ever been a time…"

I watched myself take a deep breath, saw the wild light in my eyes through the filter of his deep concern.

"Has any one person ever smelled better to you than the rest of them? Much *better?"*

"Oh."

When I'd known that he understood, my face had fallen with shame. He'd reached out to touch me, ignoring it when I'd recoiled again, and left his hand on my shoulder.

"Do what you must to resist, son. I will miss you. Here, take my car. It's faster."

He was wondering now if he'd done the right thing then, sending me away. Wondering if he hadn't hurt me with his lack of trust.

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"No," I whispered as I ran. "That was what I needed. I might so easily have betrayed that trust, if you'd told me to stay."

"I'm sorry you're suffering, Edward. But you should do what you can to keep the Swan child alive. Even if it means that you must leave us again."

"I know, I know."

"Why *did* you come back? You know how happy I am to have you here, but if this is too difficult…"

"I didn't like feeling a coward," I admitted.

We'd slowed—we were barely jogging through the darkness now.

"Better that than to put her in danger. She'll be gone in a year or two."

"You're right, I know that." Contrarily, though, his words only made me more anxious to stay. The girl would be gone in a year or two…

Carlisle stopped running and I stopped with him; he turned to examine my expression.

But you're not going to run, are you?

I hung my head.

Is it pride, Edward? There's no shame in—

"No, it isn't pride that keeps me here. Not now."

Nowhere to go?

I laughed shortly. "No. That wouldn't stop me, if I could make myself leave."

"We'll come with you, of course, if that's what you need. You only have to ask. You've moved on without complaint for the rest of them. They won't begrudge you this."

I raised one eyebrow.

He laughed. "Yes, Rosalie might, but she owes you. Anyway, it's much better for us to leave now, no damage done, than for us to leave later, after a life has been ended." All humor was gone by the end.

I flinched at his words.

"Yes," I agreed. My voice sounded hoarse.

But you're not leaving?

I sighed. "I should."

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"What holds you here, Edward? I'm failing to see…"

"I don't know if I can explain." Even to myself, it made no sense.

He measured my expression for a long moment.

No, I do not see. But I will respect your privacy, if you prefer.

"Thank you. It's generous of you, seeing as how I give privacy to no one." With one exception. And I was doing what I could to deprive her of that, wasn't I?

We all have our quirks. He laughed again. *Shall we?*

He'd just caught the scent of a small herd of deer. It was hard to rally much enthusiasm for what was, even under the best of circumstances, a less than mouthwatering aroma. Right now, with the memory of the girl's blood fresh in my mind, the smell actually turned my stomach.

I sighed. "Let's," I agreed, though I knew that forcing more blood down my throat would help so little.

We both shifted into a hunting crouch and let the unappealing scent pull us silently forward.

It was colder when we returned home. The melted snow had refrozen; it was as if a thin sheet of glass covered everything—each pine needle, each fern frond, each blade of grass was iced over.

While Carlisle went to dress for his early shift at the hospital, I stayed by the river, waiting for the sun to rise. I felt almost swollen from the amount of blood I'd consumed, but I knew the lack of actual thirst would mean little when I sat beside the girl again.

Cool and motionless as the stone I sat on, I stared at the dark water running beside the icy bank, stared right through it.

Carlisle was right. I should leave Forks. They could spread some story to explain my absence. Boarding school in Europe. Visiting distant relatives. Teenage runaway. The story didn't matter. No one would question too intensely.

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It was just a year or two, and then the girl would disappear. She would go on with her life—she would *have* a life to go on with. She'd go to college somewhere, get older, start a career, perhaps marry someone. I could picture that—I could see the girl dressed all in white and walking at a measured pace, her arm through her father's.

It was odd, the pain that image caused me. I couldn't understand it. Was I jealous, because she had a future that I could never have? That made no sense. Every one of the humans around me had that same potential ahead of them—a life—and I rarely stopped to envy them.

I should leave her to her future. Stop risking her life. That was the right thing to do. Carlisle always chose the right way. I should listen to him now.

The sun rose behind the clouds, and the faint light glistened off all the frozen glass.

One more day, I decided. I would see her one more time. I could handle that. Perhaps I would mention my pending disappearance, set the story up.

This was going to be difficult; I could feel that in the heavy reluctance that was already making me think of excuses to stay—to extend the deadline to two days, three, four… But I would do the right thing. I knew I could trust Carlisle's advice. And I also knew that I was too conflicted to make the right decision alone.

Much too conflicted. How much of this reluctance came from my obsessive curiosity, and how much came from my unsatisfied appetite?

I went inside to change into fresh clothes for school.

Alice was waiting for me, sitting on the top step at the edge of the third floor.

You're leaving again, she accused me.

I sighed and nodded.

I can't see where you're going this time.

"I don't know where I'm going yet," I whispered.

I want you to stay.

I shook my head.

Maybe Jazz and I could come with you?

"They'll need you all the more, if I'm not here to watch out for them. And think of Esme. Would you take half her family away in one blow?"

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You're going to make her so sad.

"I know. That's why you have to stay."

That's not the same as having you here, and you know it.

"Yes. But I have to do what's right."

There are many right ways, and many wrong ways, though, aren't there?

For a brief moment she was swept away into one of her strange visions; I watched along with her as the indistinct images flickered and whirled. I saw myself mixed in with strange shadows that I couldn't make out—hazy, imprecise forms. And then, suddenly, my skin was glittering in the bright sunlight of a small open meadow. This was a place I knew. There was a figure in the meadow with me, but, again, it was indistinct, not *there* enough to recognize. The images shivered and disappeared as a million tiny choices rearranged the future again.

"I didn't catch much of that," I told her when the vision went dark.

Me either. Your future is shifting around so much I can't keep up with any of it. I think*, though…*

She stopped, and she flipped through a vast collection of other recent visions for me. They were all the same—blurry and vague.

"I *think* something is changing, though," she said out loud. "Your life seems to be at a crossroads."

I laughed grimly. "You do realize that you sound like a bogus gypsy at a carnival now, right?"

She stuck her tiny tongue out at me.

"Today is all right, though, isn't it?" I asked, my voice abruptly apprehensive.

"I don't see you killing anyone today," she assured me.

"Thanks, Alice."

"Go get dressed. I won't say anything—I'll let you tell the others when you're ready."

She stood and darted back down the stairs, her shoulders hunched slightly. *Miss you. Really.*

Yes, I would really miss her, too.

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It was a quiet ride to school. Jasper could tell that Alice was upset about something, but he knew that if she wanted to talk about it she would have done so already. Emmett and Rosalie were oblivious, having another of their moments, gazing into each others' eyes with wonder—it was rather disgusting to watch from the outside. We were all quite aware how desperately in love they were. Or maybe I was just being bitter because I was the only one alone. Some days it was harder than others to live with three sets of perfectly matched lovers. This was one of them.

Maybe they would all be happier without me hanging around, ill-tempered and belligerent as the old man I should be by now.

Of course, the first thing I did when we reached the school was to look for the girl. Just preparing myself again.

Right.

It was embarrassing how my world suddenly seemed to be empty of everything but her—my whole existence centered around the girl, rather than around myself anymore.

It was easy enough to understand, though, really; after eighty years of the same thing every day and every night, any change became a point of absorption.

She had not yet arrived, but could I hear the thunderous chugging of her truck's engine in the distance. I leaned against the side of the car to wait. Alice stayed with me, while the others went straight to class. They were bored with my fixation—it was incomprehensible to them how any human could hold my interest for so long, no matter how delicious she smelled.

The girl drove slowly into view, her eyes intent on the road and her hands tight on the wheel. She seemed anxious about something. It took me a second to figure out what that something was, to realize that every human wore the same expression today. Ah, the road was slick with ice, and they were all trying to drive more carefully. I could see she was taking the added risk seriously.

That seemed in line with what little I had learned of her character. I added this to my small list: she was a serious person, a responsible person.

She parked not too far from me, but she hadn't noticed me standing here yet, staring at her. I wondered what she would do when she did? Blush and walk away?

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That was my first guess. But maybe she would stare back. Maybe she would come to talk to me.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs hopefully, just in case.

She got out of the truck with care, testing the slick ground before she put her weight on it. She didn't look up, and that frustrated me. Maybe I would go talk to her…

No, that would be wrong.

Instead of turning toward the school, she made her way to the rear of her truck, clinging to the side of the truck bed in a droll way, not trusting her footing. It made me smile, and I felt Alice's eyes on my face. I didn't listen to whatever this made her think—I was having too much fun watching the girl check her snow chains. She actually looked in some danger of falling, the way her feet were sliding around. No one else was having trouble—had she parked in the worst of the ice?

She paused there, staring down with a strange expression on her face. It was…tender? As if something about the tire was making her…*emotional?*

Again, the curiosity ached like a thirst. It was as if I *had* to know what she was thinking—as if nothing else mattered.

I would go talk to her. She looked like she could use a hand anyway, at least until she was off the slick pavement. Of course, I couldn't offer her that, could I? I hesitated, torn. As adverse as she seemed to be to snow, she would hardly welcome the touch of my cold white hand. I should have worn gloves—

"NO!" Alice gasped aloud.

Instantly, I scanned her thoughts, guessing at first that I had made a poor choice and she saw me doing something inexcusable. But it had nothing to do with me at all.

Tyler Crowley had chosen to take the turn into the parking lot at an injudicious speed. This choice would send him skidding across a patch of ice…

The vision came just half a second before the reality. Tyler's van rounded the corner as I was still watching the conclusion that had pulled the horrified gasp through Alice's lips.

No, this vision had nothing to do with me, and yet it had *everything* to do with me, because Tyler's van—the tires right now hitting the ice at the worst possible angle—

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was going to spin across the lot and crush the girl who had become the uninvited focal point of my world.

Even without Alice's foresight it would have been simple enough to read the trajectory of the vehicle, flying out of Tyler's control.

The girl, standing in the exactly wrong place at the back of her truck, looked up, bewildered by the sound of the screeching tires. She looked straight into my horror-struck eyes, and then turned to watch her approaching death.

Not her! The words shouted in my head as if they belonged to someone else.

Still locked into Alice's thoughts, I saw the vision suddenly shift, but I had no time to see what the outcome would be.

I launched myself across the lot, throwing myself between the skidding van and the frozen girl. I moved so fast that everything was a streaky blur except for the object of my focus. She didn't see me—no human eyes could have followed my flight—still staring at the hulking shape that was about to grind her body into the metal frame of her truck.

I caught her around the waist, moving with too much urgency to be as gentle as she would need me to be. In the hundredth of a second between the time that I yanked her slight form out of the path of death and the time that I crashed into to the ground with her in my arms, I was vividly aware of her fragile, breakable body.

When I heard her head crack against the ice, it felt like I had turned to ice, too.

But I didn't even have a full second to ascertain her condition. I heard the van behind us, grating and squealing as it twisted around the sturdy iron body of the girl's truck. It was changing course, arcing, coming for her again—like she was a magnet, pulling it toward us.

A word I'd never said before in the presence of a lady slid between my clenched teeth.

I had already done too much. As I'd nearly flown through the air to push her out of the way, I'd been fully aware of the mistake I was making. Knowing that it was a mistake did not stop me, but I was not oblivious to the risk I was taking—taking, not just for myself, but for my entire family.

Exposure.

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And *this* certainly wasn't going to help, but there was no way I was going to allow the van to succeed in its second attempt to take her life.

I dropped her and threw my hands out, catching the van before it could touch the girl. The force of it hurled me back into the car parked beside her truck, and I could feel its frame buckle behind my shoulders. The van shuddered and shivered against the unyielding obstacle of my arms, and then swayed, balancing unstably on the two far tires.

If I moved my hands, the back tire of the van was going fall onto her legs.

Oh, for the *love* of *all* that was *holy*, would the catastrophes never end? Was there anything else that could go wrong? I could hardly sit here, holding the van in the air, and wait for rescue. Nor could I throw the van away—there was the driver to consider, his thoughts incoherent with panic.

With an internal groan, I shoved the van so that it rocked away from us for an instant. As it fell back toward me, I caught it under the frame with my right hand while I wrapped my left arm around the girl's waist again and drug her out from under the van, pulling her tight up against my side. Her body moved limply as I swung her around so that her legs would be in the clear—was she conscious? How much damage had I done to her in my impromptu rescue attempt?

I let the van drop, now that it could not hurt her. It crashed to the pavement, all the windows shattering in unison.

I knew that I was in the middle of a crisis. How much had she seen? Had any other witnesses watched me materialize at her side and then juggle the van while I tried to keep her out from under it? These questions *should* be my biggest concern.

But I was too anxious to really care about the threat of exposure as much as I should. Too panic-stricken that I might have injured her myself in my effort to protect her. Too frightened to have her this close to me, knowing what I would smell if I allowed myself to inhale. Too aware of the heat of her soft body, pressed against mine—even through the double obstacle of our jackets, I could feel that heat…

The first fear was the greatest fear. As the screaming of the witnesses erupted around us, I leaned down to examine her face, to see if she was conscious—hoping fiercely that she was not bleeding anywhere.

Her eyes were open, staring in shock.

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"Bella?" I asked urgently. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She said the words automatically in a dazed voice.

Relief, so exquisite it was nearly pain, washed through me at the sound of her voice. I sucked in a breath through my teeth, and did not mind the accompanying burn in my throat. I almost welcomed it.

She struggled to sit up, but I was not ready to release her. It felt somehow…safer? Better, at least, having her tucked into my side.

"Be careful," I warned her. "I think you hit your head pretty hard."

There had been no smell of fresh blood—a mercy, that—but this did not rule out internal damage. I was abruptly anxious to get her to Carlisle and a full compliment of radiology equipment.

"Ow," she said, her tone comically shocked as she realized I was right about her head.

"That's what I thought." Relief made it funny to me, made me almost giddy.

"How in the…" Her voice trailed off, and her eyelids fluttered. "How did you get over here so fast?"

The relief turned sour, the humor vanished. She *had* noticed too much.

Now that it appeared that the girl was in decent shape, the anxiety for my family became severe.

"I was standing right next to you, Bella." I knew from experience that if I was very confident as I lied, it made any questioner less sure of the truth.

She struggled to move again, and this time I allowed it. I needed to breathe so that I could play my role correctly. I needed space from her warm-blooded heat so that it would not combine with her scent to overwhelm me. I slid away from her, as far as was possible in the small space between the wrecked vehicles.

She stared up at me, and I stared back. To look away first was a mistake only an incompetent liar would make, and I was not an incompetent liar. My expression was smooth, benign… It seemed to confuse her. That was good.

The accident scene was surrounded now. Mostly students, children, peering and pushing through the cracks to see if any mangled bodies were visible. There was a

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babble of shouting and a gush of shocked thought. I scanned the thoughts once to make sure there were no suspicions yet, and then tuned it out and concentrated only on the girl.

She was distracted by the bedlam. She glanced around, her expression still stunned, and tried to get to her feet.

I put my hand lightly on her shoulder to hold her down.

"Just stay put for now." She *seemed* alright, but should she really be moving her neck? Again, I wished for Carlisle. My years of theoretical medical study were no match for his centuries of hands-on medical practice.

"But it's cold," she objected.

She had almost been crushed to death two distinct times and crippled one more, and it was the cold that worried her. A chuckle slid through my teeth before I could remember that the situation was not funny.

Bella blinked, and then her eyes focused on my face. "You were over there."

That sobered me again.

She glanced toward the south, though there was nothing to see now but the crumpled side of the van. "You were by your car."

"No, I wasn't."

"I saw you," she insisted; her voice was childlike when she was being stubborn. Her chin jutted out.

"Bella, I was standing with you, and I pulled you out of the way."

I stared deeply into her wide eyes, trying to will her into accepting my version—the only rational version on the table.

Her jaw set. "No."

I tried to stay calm, to not panic. If only I could keep her quiet for a few moments, to give me a chance to destroy the evidence….and undermine her story by disclosing her head injury.

Shouldn't it be easy to keep this silent, secretive girl quiet? If only she would trust me, just for a few moments…

"Please, Bella," I said, and my voice was too intense, because I suddenly *wanted* her to trust me. Wanted it badly, and not just in regards to this accident. A stupid desire. What sense would it make for her to trust *me*?

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"Why?" she asked, still defensive.

"Trust me," I pleaded.

"Will you promise to explain everything to me later?"

It made me angry to have to lie to her again, when I so much wished that I could somehow deserve her trust. So, when I answered her, it was a retort.

"Fine."

"Fine," she echoed in the same tone.

While the rescue attempt began around us—adults arriving, authorities called, sirens in the distance—I tried to ignore the girl and get my priorities in the right order. I searched through every mind in the lot, the witnesses and the latecomers both, but I could find nothing dangerous. Many were surprised to see me here beside Bella, but all concluded—as there was no other possible conclusion—that they had just not noticed me standing by the girl before the accident.

She was the only one who didn't accept the easy explanation, but she would be considered the least reliable witness. She had been frightened, traumatized, not to mention sustaining the blow to the head. Possibly in shock. It would be acceptable for her story to be confused, wouldn't it? No one would give it much credence above so many other spectators…

I winced when I caught the thoughts of Rosalie, Jasper and Emmett, just arriving on the scene. There would be hell to pay for this tonight.

I wanted to iron out the indention my shoulders had made against the tan car, but the girl was too close. I'd have to wait till she was distracted.

It was frustrating to wait—so many eyes on me—as the humans struggled with the van, trying to pull it away from us. I might have helped them, just to speed the process, but I was already in enough trouble and the girl had sharp eyes. Finally, they were able to shift it far enough away for the EMTs to get to us with their stretchers.

A familiar, grizzled face appraised me.

"Hey, Edward," Brett Warner said. He was also a registered nurse, and I knew him well from the hospital. It was a stroke of luck—the only luck today—that he was the first through to us. In his thoughts, he was noting that I looked alert and calm. "You okay, kid?"

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"Perfect, Brett. Nothing touched me. But I'm afraid Bella here might have a concussion. She really hit her head when I yanked her out of the way…"

Brett turned his attention to the girl, who shot me a fierce look of betrayal. Oh, that was right. She was the quiet martyr—she'd prefer to suffer in silence.

She did not contradict my story immediately, though, and this made me feel easier.

The next EMT tried to insist that I allow myself to be treated, but it wasn't too difficult to dissuade him. I promised I would let my father examine me, and he let it go. With most humans, speaking with cool assurance was all that was needed. Most humans, just not the girl, of course. Did she fit into *any* of the normal patterns?

As they put a neck brace on her—and her face flushed scarlet with embarrassment—I used the moment of distraction to quietly rearrange the shape of the dent in the tan car with the back of my foot. Only my siblings noticed what I was doing, and I heard Emmett's mental promise to catch anything I missed.

Grateful for his help—and more grateful that Emmett, at least, had already forgiven my dangerous choice—I was more relaxed as I climbed into the front seat of the ambulance next to Brett.

The chief of police arrived before they had gotten Bella into the back of the ambulance.

Though Bella's father's thoughts were past words, the panic and concern emanating out of the man's mind drown out just about every other thought in the vicinity. Wordless anxiety and guilt, a great swell of them, washed out of him as he saw his only daughter on the gurney.

Washed out of him and through me, echoing and growing stronger. When Alice had warned me that killing Charlie Swan's daughter would kill him, too, she had not been exaggerating.

My head bowed with that guilt as I listened to his panicked voice.

"Bella!" he shouted.

"I'm completely fine, Char—Dad." She sighed. "There's nothing wrong with me."

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Her assurance barely soothed his dread. He turned at once to the closest EMT and demanded more information.

I wasn't until I heard him speaking, forming perfectly coherent sentences despite his panic, that I realized that his anxiety and concern were *not* wordless. I just…could not hear the exact words.

Hmm. Charlie Swan was not as silent as his daughter, but I could see where she got it from. Interesting.

I'd never spent much time around the town's police chief. I'd always taken him for a man of slow thought—now I realized that *I* was the one who was slow. His thoughts were partially concealed, not absent. I could only make out the tenor, the tone of them…

I wanted to listen harder, to see if I could find in this new, lesser puzzle the key to the girl's secrets. But Bella was loaded into the back by then, and the ambulance was on its way.

It was hard to tear myself away from this possible solution to the mystery that had come to obsess me. But I had to think now—to look at what had been done today from every angle. I had to listen, to make sure that I had not put us all in so much danger that we would have to leave immediately. I had to concentrate.

There was nothing in the thoughts of the EMTs to worry me. As far as they could tell, there was nothing seriously wrong with the girl. And Bella was sticking to the story I'd provided, thus far.

The first priority, when we reached the hospital, was to see Carlisle. I hurried through the automatic doors, but I was unable to totally forgo watching after Bella; I kept an eye on her through the paramedics' thoughts.

It was easy to find my father's familiar mind. He was in his small office, all alone—the second stroke of luck in this luckless day.

"Carlisle."

He'd heard my approach, and he was alarmed as soon as he saw my face. He jumped to his feet, his face paling to bone white. He leaned forward across the neatly organized walnut desk.

Edward—you didn't—

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"No, no, it's not that."

He took deep breath. *Of course not. I'm sorry I entertained the thought. Your eyes, of course, I should have known…* He noted my still-golden eyes with relief.

"She's hurt, though, Carlisle, probably not seriously, but—"

"What happened?"

"A stupid car accident. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But I couldn't just stand there—let it crush her—"

Start over, I don't understand. How were you involved?

"A van skidded across the ice," I whispered. I stared at the wall behind him while I spoke. Instead of a throng of framed diplomas, he had one simple oil painting—a favorite of his, an undiscovered Hassam. "She was in the way. Alice saw it coming, but there wasn't time to do anything but really *run* across the lot and shove her out of the way. No one noticed…except for her. I had to stop the van, too, but again, nobody saw that…besides her. I'm…I'm sorry Carlisle. I didn't mean to put us in danger."

He circled the desk and put his hand on my shoulder.

You did the right thing. And it couldn't have been easy for you. I'm proud of you, Edward.

I could look him in the eye then. "She knows there's something…wrong with me."

"That doesn't matter. If we have to leave, we leave. What has she said?"

I shook my head, a little frustrated. "Nothing yet."

Yet?

"She agreed to my version of events—but she's expecting an explanation."

He frowned, pondering this.

"She hit her head—well, I did that," I continued quickly. "I knocked her to the ground fairly hard. She seems fine, but… I don't think it will take much to discredit her account."

I felt like a cad just saying the words.

Carlisle heard the distaste in my voice. *Perhaps that won't be necessary. Let's see what happens, shall we? It sounds like I have a patient to check on.*

"Please," I said. "I'm so worried that I hurt her."

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Carlisle's expression brightened. He smoothed his fair hair—just a few shades lighter than his golden eyes—and he laughed.

It's been an interesting day for you, hasn't it? In his mind, I could see the irony, and it was humorous, at least to him. Quite the reversal of roles. Somewhere during that short thoughtless second when I'd sprinted across the icy lot, I had transformed from killer to protector.

I laughed with him, remembering how sure I'd been that Bella would never need protecting from anything more than myself. There was an edge to my laugh because, van notwithstanding, that was still entirely true.

I waited alone in Carlisle's office—one of the longer hours I had ever lived—listening to the hospital full of thoughts.

Tyler Crowley, the van's driver, looked to be hurt worse than Bella, and the attention shifted to him while she waited her turn to be X-rayed. Carlisle kept in the background, trusting the PA's diagnosis that the girl was only slightly injured. This made me anxious, but I knew he was right. One glance at his face and she would be immediately reminded of me, of the fact that there was something not right about my family, and that might set her talking.

She certainly had a willing enough partner to converse with. Tyler was consumed with guilt over the fact that he had almost killed her, and he couldn't seem to shut up about it. I could see her expression through his eyes, and it was clear that she wished he would stop. How did he not see that?

There was a tense moment for me when Tyler asked her how she'd gotten out of the way.

I waited, not breathing, as she hesitated.

"Um..." he heard her say. Then she paused for so long that Tyler wondered if his question had confused her. Finally, she went on. *"Edward pulled me out of the way."*

I exhaled. And then my breathing accelerated. I'd never heard her speak my name before. I like the way it sounded—even just hearing it through Tyler's thoughts. I wanted to hear it for myself…

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"Edward Cullen," she said, when Tyler didn't realize who she meant. I found myself at the door, my hand on the knob. The desire to see her was growing stronger. I had to remind myself of the need for caution.

"He was standing next to me."

"*Cullen?" Huh. That's weird. "I didn't see him." I could have sworn… "Wow, it was all so fast, I guess. Is he okay?"*

"I think so. He's here somewhere, but they didn't make him use a stretcher."

I saw the thoughtful look on her face, the suspicious tightening of her eyes, but these little changes in her expression were lost on Tyler.

She's pretty, he was thinking, almost in surprise. *Even all messed up. Not my usual type, still… I should take her out. Make up for today…*

I was out in the hall, then, halfway to the emergency room, without thinking for one second about what I was doing. Luckily, the nurse entered the room before I could—it was Bella's turn for X-rays. I leaned against the wall in a dark nook just around the corner, and tried to get a grip on myself while she was wheeled away.

It didn't matter that Tyler thought she was pretty. Anyone would notice that. There was no reason for me to feel…how *did* I feel? Annoyed? Or was *angry* closer to the truth? That made no sense at all.

I stayed where I was for as long as I could, but impatience got the best of me and I took a back way around to the radiology room. She'd already been moved back to the ER, but I was able to take a peek at her x-rays while the nurse's back was turned.

I felt calmer when I had. Her head was fine. I hadn't hurt her, not really.

Carlisle caught me there.

You look better, he commented.

I just looked straight ahead. We weren't alone, the halls full of orderlies and visitors.

Ah, yes. He stuck her x-rays to the lightboard, but I didn't need a second look. *I see. She's absolutely fine. Well done, Edward.*

The sound of my father's approval created a mixed reaction in me. I would have been pleased, except that I knew that he would not approve of what I was going to do now. At least, he would not approve if he knew my real motivations…

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"I think I'm going to go talk to her—before she sees you," I murmured under my breath. "Act natural, like nothing happened. Smooth it over." All acceptable reasons.

Carlisle nodded absently, still looking over the x-rays. "Good idea. Hmm."

I looked to see what had his interest.

Look at all the healed contusions! How many times did her mother drop her? Carlisle laughed to himself at his joke.

"I'm beginning to think the girl just has really bad luck. Always in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Forks is certainly the wrong place for her, with you here.

I flinched.

Go ahead. Smooth things over. I'll join you momentarily.

I walked away quickly, feeling guilty. Perhaps I was too good a liar, if I could fool Carlisle.

When I got to the ER, Tyler was mumbling under his breath, still apologizing. The girl was trying to escape his remorse by pretending to sleep. Her eyes were closed, but her breathing was not even, and now and then her fingers would twitch impatiently.

I stared at her face for a long moment. This was the last time I would see her. That fact triggered an acute aching in my chest. Was it because I hated to leave any puzzle unsolved? That did not seem like enough of an explanation.

Finally, I took a deep breath and moved into view.

When Tyler saw me, he started to speak, but I put one finger to my lips.

"Is she sleeping?" I murmured.

Bella's eyes snapped open and focused on my face. They widened momentarily, and then narrowed in anger or suspicion. I remembered that I had a role to play, so I smiled at her as if nothing unusual had happened this morning—besides a blow to her head and a bit of imagination run wild.

"Hey, Edward," Tyler said. "I'm really sorry—"

I raised one hand to halt his apology. "No blood, no foul," I said wryly. Without thinking, I smiled too widely at my private joke.

It was amazingly easy to ignore Tyler, lying no more than four feet from me, covered in fresh blood. I'd never understood how Carlisle was able to do that—ignore

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the blood of his patients in order to treat them. Wouldn't the constant temptation be so distracting, so dangerous…? But, now… I could see how, if you were focusing on something else *hard* enough, the temptation was be nothing at all.

Even fresh and exposed, Tyler's blood had nothing on Bella's.

I kept my distance from her, seating myself on the foot of Tyler's mattress.

"So, what's the verdict?" I asked her.

Her lower lip pushed out a little. "There's nothing wrong with me at all, but they won't let me go. How come you aren't strapped to a gurney like the rest of us?"

Her impatience made me smile again.

I could hear Carlisle in the hall now.

"It's all about who you know," I said lightly. "But don't worry, I came to spring you."

I watched her reaction carefully as my father entered the room. Her eyes widened and her mouth actually fell open in surprise. I groaned internally. Yes, she'd certainly noticed the resemblance.

"So, Miss Swan, how are you feeling?" Carlisle asked. He had a wonderfully soothing beside manner that put most patients at ease within moments. I couldn't tell how it affected Bella.

"I'm fine," she said quietly.

Carlisle clipped her X-rays to the lightboard by the bed. "Your X-rays look good. Does your head hurt? Edward said you hit it pretty hard."

She sighed, and said, "I'm fine," again, but this time impatience leaked into her voice. Then she glowered once in my direction.

Carlisle stepped closer to her and ran his fingers gently over her scalp until he found the bump under her hair.

I was caught off guard by the wave of emotion that crashed over me.

I had seen Carlisle work with humans a thousand times. Years ago, I had even assisted him informally—though only in situations where blood was not involved. So it wasn't a new thing to me, to watch him interact with the girl as if he were as human as she was. I'd envied his control many times, but that was not the same as this emotion. I

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envied him more than his control. I ached for the difference between Carlisle and me—that he could touch her so gently, without fear, knowing he would never harm her…

She winced, and I twitched in my seat. I had to concentrate for a moment to keep my relaxed posture.

"Tender?" Carlisle asked.

Her chin jerked up a fraction. "Not really," she said.

Another small piece of her character fell into place: she was brave. She didn't like to show weakness.

Possibly the most vulnerable creature I'd ever seen, and she didn't want to seem weak. A chuckle slid through my lips.

She shot another glare at me.

"Well," Carlisle said. "Your father is in the waiting room—you can go home with him now. But come back if you feel dizzy or have trouble with your eyesight at all."

Her father was here? I swept through the thoughts in the crowded waiting room, but I couldn't pick his subtle mental voice out of the group before she was speaking again, her face anxious.

"Can't I go back to school?"

"Maybe you should take it easy today," Carlisle suggested.

Her eyes flickered back to me. "Does *he* get to go to school?"

Act normal, smooth things over…ignore the way it feels when she looks me in the eye…

"Someone has to spread the good news that we survived," I said.

"Actually," Carlisle corrected, "most of the school seems to be in the waiting room."

I anticipated her reaction this time—her aversion to attention. She didn't disappoint.

"Oh no," she moaned, and she put her hands over her face.

I liked that I'd finally guessed right. I was beginning to understand her…

"Do you want to stay?" Carlisle asked.

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"No, no!" she said quickly, swinging her legs over the side of the mattress and sliding down till her feet were on the floor. She stumbled forward, off-balance, into Carlisle's arms. He caught and steadied her.

Again, the envy flooded through me.

"I'm fine," she said before he could comment, faint pink in her cheeks.

Of course, that wouldn't bother Carlisle. He made sure she was balanced, and then dropped his hands.

"Take some Tylenol for the pain," he instructed.

"It doesn't hurt that bad."

Carlisle smiled as he signed her chart. "It sounds like you were extremely lucky."

She turned her face slightly, to stare at me with hard eyes. "Lucky Edward happened to be standing next to me."

"Oh, well, yes," Carlisle agreed quickly, hearing the same thing in her voice that I heard. She hadn't written her suspicions off as imagination. Not yet.

All yours, Carlisle thought. *Handle it as you think best.*

"Thanks so much," I whispered, quick and quiet. Neither human heard me. Carlisle's lips turned up a tiny bit at my sarcasm as he turned to Tyler. "I'm afraid that *you'll* have to stay with us just a little bit longer," he said as he began examining the slashes left by the shattered windshield.

Well, I'd made the mess, so it was only fair that I had to deal with it.

Bella walked deliberately toward me, not stopping until she was uncomfortably close. I remembered how I had hoped, before all the mayhem, that she would approach me… This was like a mockery of that wish.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she hissed at me.

Her warm breath brushed my face and I had to stagger back a step. Her appeal had not abated one bit. Every time she was near me, it triggered all my worst, most urgent instincts. Venom flowed in my mouth and my body yearned to strike—to wrench her into my arms and crush her throat to my teeth.

My mind was stronger than my body, but only just.

"Your father is waiting for you," I reminded her, my jaw clenched tight.

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She glanced toward Carlisle and Tyler. Tyler was paying us no attention at all, but Carlisle was monitoring my every breath.

Carefully, Edward.

"I'd like to speak to you alone, if you don't mind," she insisted in a low voice.

I wanted to tell her that I did mind very much, but I knew I would have to do this eventually. I may as well get on with it.

I was full of so many conflicting emotions as I stalked out of the room, listening to her stumbling footsteps behind me, trying to keep up.

I had a show to put on now. I knew the role I would play—I had the character down: I would be the villain. I would lie and ridicule and be cruel.

It went against all my better impulses—the human impulses that I'd clung to through all these years. I'd never wanted to deserve trust more than in this moment, when I had to destroy all possibility of it.

It made it worse to know that this would be the last memory she would have of me. This was my farewell scene.

I turned on her.

"What do you want?" I asked coldly.

She cringed back slightly from my hostility. Her eyes turned bewildered, the expression that had haunted me…

"You owe me an explanation," she said in a small voice; her ivory face blanched.

It was very hard to keep my voice harsh. "I saved your life—I don't owe you anything."

She flinched—it burned like acid to watch my words hurt her.

"You promised," she whispered.

"Bella, you hit your head, you don't know what you're talking about."

Her chin came up then. "There's nothing wrong with my head."

She was angry now, and that made it easier for me. I met her glare, making my face more unfriendly.

"What do you want from me, Bella?"

"I want to know the truth. I want to know why I'm lying for you."

What she wanted was only fair—it frustrated me to have to deny her.

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"What do you *think* happened?" I nearly growled at her.

Her words poured out in a torrent. "All I know is that you weren't anywhere near me—Tyler didn't see you, either, so don't tell me I hit my head too hard. That van was going to crush us both—and it didn't, and your hands left dents in the side of it—and you left a dent in the other car, and you're not hurt at all—and the van should have smashed my legs, but you were holding it up…" Suddenly, she clenched her teeth together and her eyes were glistening with unshed tears.

I stared at her, my expression derisive, though what I really felt was awe; she had seen everything.

"You think I lifted a van off you?" I asked sarcastically.

She answered with one stiff nod.

My voice grew more mocking. "Nobody will believe that, you know."

She made an effort to control her anger. When she answered me, she spoke each word with slow deliberation. "I'm not going to tell anybody."

She meant it—I could see that in her eyes. Even furious and betrayed, she would keep my secret.

Why?

The shock of it ruined my carefully designed expression for half a second, and then I pulled myself together.

"Then why does it matter?" I asked, working to keep my voice severe.

"It matters to me," she said intensely. "I don't like to lie—so there'd better be a good reason why I'm doing it."

She was asking me to trust her. Just as I wanted her to trust me. But this was a line I could not cross.

My voice stayed callous. "Can't you just thank me and get it over with?"

"Thank you," she said, and then she fumed silently, waiting.

"You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"No."

"In that case…" I couldn't tell her the truth if I wanted to…and I *didn't* want to. I'd rather she made up her own story than know what I was, because nothing could be

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worse than the truth—I was a living nightmare, straight from the pages of a horror novel. "I hope you enjoy disappointment."

We scowled at each other. It was odd how endearing her anger was. Like a furious kitten, soft and harmless, and so unaware of her own vulnerability.

She flushed pink and ground her teeth together again. "Why did you even bother?"

Her question wasn't one that I was expecting or prepared to answer. I lost my hold on the role I was playing. I felt the mask slip from my face, and I told her—this one time—the truth.

"I don't know."

I memorized her face one last time—it was still set in lines of anger, the blood not yet faded from her cheeks—and then I turned and walked away from her.

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4. Visions

I went back to school. This was the right thing to do, the most inconspicuous way to behave.

By the end of the day, almost all the other students had returned to class, too. Just Tyler and Bella and a few others—who were probably using the accident as a chance to ditch—remained absent.

It shouldn't be so hard for me to do the right thing. But, all afternoon, I was gritting my teeth against the urge that had me yearning ditch, too—in order to go find the girl again.

Like a stalker. An obsessessed stalker. An obsessessed, vampire stalker.

School today was—somehow, impossibly—even more boring than it had seemed just a week ago. Coma-like. It was as if the color had drained from the bricks, the trees, the sky, the faces around me… I stared at the cracks in the walls.

There was another right thing I should be doing…that I was not. Of course, it was also a wrong thing. It all depended on the perspective from which you viewed it.

From the perspective of a Cullen—not just a vampire, but a *Cullen*, someone who belonged to a family, such a rare state in our world—the right thing to do would have gone something like this:

"I'm surprised to see you in class, Edward. I heard you were involved in that awful accident this morning."

"Yes, I was, Mr. Banner, but I was the lucky one." A friendly smile. "I didn't get hurt at all… I wish I could say the same for Tyler and Bella."

"How are they?"

"I think Tyler is fine…just some superficial scrapes from the windshield glass. I'm not sure about Bella, though." A worried frown. "She might have a concussion. I heard she was pretty incoherent for a while—seeing things even. I know the doctors were worried…"

That's how it should have gone. That's what I owed my family.

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"I'm surprised to see you in class, Edward. I heard you were involved in that awful accident this morning."

"I wasn't hurt." No smile.

Mr. Banner shifted his weight from foot to foot, uncomfortable.

"Do you have any idea how Tyler Crowley and Bella Swan are? I heard there were some injuries…"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

Mr. Banner cleared his throat. "Er, right…" he said, my cold stare making his voice sound a bit strained.

He walked quickly back to the front of classroom and began his lecture.

It was the wrong thing to do. Unless you looked at it from a more obscure point of view.

It just seemed so…so *unchivalrous* to slander the girl behind her back, especially when she was proving more trustworthy than I could have dreamed. She hadn't said anything to betray me, despite having good reason to do so. Would I betray her when she had done nothing but keep my secret?

I had a nearly identical conversation with Mrs. Goff—just in Spanish rather than in English—and Emmett gave me a long look.

I hope you have a good explanation for what happened today. Rose is on the warpath.

I rolled my eyes without looking at him.

I actually had come up with a perfectly sound explanation. Just suppose I *hadn't* done anything to stop the van from crushing the girl… I recoiled from that thought. But if she *had* been hit, if she'd been mangled and bleeding, the red fluid spilling, wasting on the blacktop, the scent of the fresh blood pulsing through the air …

I shuddered again, but not just in horror. Part of me shivered in desire. No, I would not have been able to watch her bleed without exposing us all in a much more flagrant and shocking way.

It was a perfectly sound excuse…but I wouldn't use it. It was too shameful.

And I hadn't thought of it until long after the fact, regardless.

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Look out for Jasper, Emmett went on, oblivious to my reverie. *He's not as angry…but he's more resolved.*

I saw what he meant, and for a moment the room swam around me. My rage was so all-consuming that a red haze clouded my vision. I thought I would choke on it.

SHEESH, EDWARD! GET A GRIP! Emmett shouted at me in his head. His hand came down on my shoulder, holding me in my seat before I could jump to my feet. He rarely used his full strength—there was rarely a need, for he was so much stronger than any vampire any of us had ever encountered—but he used it now. He gripped my arm, rather than pushing me down. If he'd been pushing, the chair under me would have collapsed.

EASY! He ordered.

I tried to calm myself, but it was hard. The rage burned in my head.

Jasper's not going to do anything until we all talk. I just thought you should know the direction he's headed.

I concentrated on relaxing, and I felt Emmett's hand loosen.

Try not to make more *of a spectacle of yourself. You're in enough trouble as it is.*

I took a deep breath and Emmett released me.

I searched around the room routinely, but our confrontation had been so short and silent that only a few people sitting behind Emmett had even noticed. None of them knew what to make of it, and they shrugged it off. The Cullens were freaks—everyone knew that already.

Damn, kid, you're a mess, Emmett added, sympathy in his tone.

"Bite me," I muttered under my breath, and I heard his low chuckle.

Emmett didn't hold grudges, and I probably ought to be more grateful for his easy going nature. But I could see that Jasper's intentions made sense to Emmett, that he was considering how it might be the best course of action.

The rage simmered, barely under control. Yes, Emmett was stronger than I was, but he'd yet to beat me in a wrestling match. He claimed that this was because I cheated, but hearing thoughts was just as much a part of who I was as his immense strength was a part of him. We were evenly matched in a fight.

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A fight? Was that where this was headed? Was I going to fight with my *family* over a human I barely knew?

I thought about that for a moment, thought about the fragile feel of the girl's body in my arms in juxtaposition with Jasper, Rose, and Emmett—supernaturally strong and fast, killing machines by nature…

Yes, I would fight for her. Against my family. I shuddered.

But it wasn't fair to leave her undefended when I was the one who'd put her in danger.

I couldn't win alone, though, not against the three of them, and I wondered who my allies would be.

Carlisle, certainly. He would not fight anyone, but he would be wholly against Rose's and Jasper's designs. That might be all I needed. I would see…

Esme, doubtful. She would not side *against* me either, and she would hate to disagree with Carlisle, but she would be for any plan that kept her family intact. Her first priority would not be rightness, but me. If Carlisle was the soul of our family, then Esme was the heart. He gave us a leader who deserved following; she made that following into an act of love. We all loved each other—even under the fury I felt toward Jasper and Rose right now, even planning to fight them to save the girl, I knew that I loved them.

Alice…I had no idea. It would probably depend on what she saw coming. She would side with the winner, I imagined.

So, I would have to do this without help. I wasn't a match for them alone, but I wasn't going to let the girl be hurt because of me. That might mean evasive action…

My rage dulled a bit with the sudden, black humor. I could imagine how the girl would react to my kidnapping her. Of course, I rarely guessed her reactions right—but what other reaction could she have besides terror?

I wasn't sure how to manage that, though—kidnapping her. I wouldn't be able to stand being close to her for very long. Perhaps I would just deliver her back to her mother. Even that much would be fraught with danger. For her.

And also for me, I realized suddenly. If I were to kill her by accident… I wasn't certain exactly how much pain that would cause me, but I knew it would be multifaceted and intense.

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The time passed quickly while I mulled over all the complications ahead of me: the argument waiting for me at home, the conflict with my family, the lengths I might be forced to go to afterward…

Well, I couldn't complain that life *outside* this school was monotonous any more. The girl had changed that much.

Emmett and I walked silently to the car when the bell rang. He was worrying about me, and worrying about Rosalie. He knew whose side he would have to choose in a quarrel, and it bothered him.

The others were waiting for us in the car, also silent. We were a very quiet group. Only I could hear the shouting.

Idiot! Lunatic! Moron! Jackass! Selfish, irresponsible fool! Rosalie kept up a constant stream of insults at the top of her mental lungs. It made it hard to hear the others, but I ignored her as best I could.

Emmett was right about Jasper. He was sure of his course.

Alice was troubled, worrying about Jasper, flipping through images of the future. No matter which direction Jasper came at the girl, Alice always saw me there, blocking him. Interesting…neither Rosalie nor Emmett was with him in these visions. So Jasper planned to work alone. That would even things up.

Jasper was the best, certainly the most experienced fighter among us. My one advantage lay in that I could hear his moves before he made them.

I had never fought more than playfully with Emmett or Jasper—just horsing around. I felt sick at the thought of really trying to hurt Jasper…

No, not that. Just to block him. That was all.

I concentrated on Alice, memorizing Jasper's different avenues of attack.

As I did that, her visions shifted, moving further and further away from the Swan's house. I was cutting him off earlier…

Stop that, Edward! It can't happen this way. I won't let it.

I didn't answer her, I just kept watching.

She began searching farther ahead, into the misty, unsure realm of distant possibilities. Everything was shadowy and vague.

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The entire way home, the charged silence did not lift. I parked in the big garage off the house; Carlisle's Mercedes was there, next to Emmett's big jeep, Rose's M3 and my Vanquish. I was glad Carlisle was already home—this silence would end explosively, and I wanted him there when that happened.

We went straight to the dining room.

The room was, of course, never used for its intended purpose. But it was furnished with a long oval mahogany table surrounded by chairs—we were scrupulous about having all the correct props in place. Carlisle liked to use it as a conference room. In a group with such strong and disparate personalities, sometimes it was necessary to discuss things in a calm, seated manner.

I had a feeling that the setting was not going to help much today.

Carlisle sat in his usual seat at the eastern head of the room. Esme was beside him—they held hands on top of the table.

Esme's eyes were on me, their golden depths full of concern.

Stay. It was her only thought.

I wished I could smile at the woman who was truly a mother to me, but I had no reassurances for her now.

I sat on Carlisle's other side. Esme reached around him to put her free hand on my shoulder. She had no idea of what was about to start; she was just worrying about me.

Carlisle had a better sense of what was coming. His lips were pressed tightly together and his forehead was creased. The expression looked too old for his young face.

As everyone else sat, I could see the lines being drawn.

Rosalie sat directly across from Carlisle, on the other end of the long table. She glared at me, never looking away.

Emmett sat beside her, his face and thoughts both wry.

Jasper hesitated, and then went to stand against the wall behind Rosalie. He was decided, regardless of the outcome of this discussion. My teeth locked together.

Alice was the last to come in, and her eyes were focused on something far away—the future, still too indistinct for her to make use of it. Without seeming to think about it,

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she sat next to Esme. She rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache. Jasper twitched uneasily and considered joining her, but he kept his place.

I took a deep breath. I had started this—I should speak first.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking first at Rose, then Jasper and then Emmett. "I didn't mean to put any of you at risk. It was thoughtless, and I take full responsibility for my hasty action."

Rosalie glared at me balefully. "What do you mean, 'take full responsibility'? Are you going to fix it?"

"Not the way you mean," I said, working to keep my voice even and quiet. "I'm willing to leave now, if that makes things better." *If I believe that the girl will be safe, if I believe that none of you will touch her*, I amended in my head.

"No," Esme murmured. "No, Edward."

I patted her hand. "It's just a few years."

"Esme's right, though," Emmett said. "You can't go anywhere now. That would be the *opposite* of helpful. We have to know what people are thinking, now more than ever."

"Alice will catch anything major," I disagreed.

Carlisle shook his head. "I think Emmett is right, Edward. The girl will be more likely to talk if you disappear. It's all of us leave, or none of us."

"She won't say anything," I insisted quickly. Rose was building up to the explosion, and I wanted this fact out there first.

"You don't know her mind," Carlisle reminded me.

"I know this much. Alice, back me up."

Alice stared up at me wearily. "I can't see what will happen if we just ignore this." She glanced at Rose and Jasper.

No, she couldn't see that future—not when Rosalie and Jasper were so decided against ignoring the incident.

Rosalie's palm smacked down on the table with a loud bang. "We can't allow the human a chance to say anything. Carlisle, you *must* see that. Even if we decided to all disappear, it's not safe to leave stories behind us. We live so differently from the rest of

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our kind—you know there are those who would love an excuse to point fingers. We have to be more careful than anyone else!"

"We've left rumors behind us before," I reminded her.

"Just rumors and suspicions, Edward. Not eyewitnesses and evidence!"

"Evidence!" I scoffed.

But Jasper was nodding, his eyes hard.

"Rose—" Carlisle began.

"Let me finish, Carlisle. It doesn't have to be any big production. The girl hit her head today. So maybe that injury turns out to be more serious that it looked." Rosalie shrugged. "Every mortal goes to sleep with the chance of never waking up. The others would expect us to clean up after ourselves. Technically, that would make it Edward's job, but this is obviously beyond him. You know I'm capable of control. I would leave no evidence behind me."

"Yes, Rosalie, we all know how proficient an assassin you are," I snarled.

She hissed at me, furious.

"Edward, please," Carlisle said. Then he turned to Rosalie. "Rosalie, I looked the other way in Rochester because I felt that you were owed your justice. The men you killed had wronged you monstrously. This is not the same situation. The Swan girl is an innocent."

"It's not personal, Carlisle," Rosalie said through her teeth. "It's to protect us all."

There was a brief moment of silence while Carlisle thought through his answer. When he nodded, Rosalie's eyes lit up. She should have known better. Even if I hadn't been able to read his thoughts, I could have anticipated his next words. Carlisle never compromised.

"I know you mean well, Rosalie, but…I'd like very much for our family to be *worth* protecting. The occasional…accident or lapse in control is a regrettable part of who we are." It was very like him to include himself in the plural, though he had never had such a lapse himself. "To murder a blameless child in cold blood is another thing entirely. I believe the risk she presents, whether she speaks her suspicions or not, is

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nothing to the greater risk. If we make exceptions to protect ourselves, we risk something much more important. We risk losing the essence of who we are."

I controlled my expression very carefully. It wouldn't do at all to grin. Or to applaud, as I wished I could.

Rosalie scowled. "It's just being responsible."

"It's being callous," Carlisle corrected gently. "Every life is precious."

Rosalie sighed heavily and her lower lip pouted out. Emmett patted her shoulder. "It'll be fine, Rose," he encouraged in a low voice.

"The question," Carlisle continued, "is whether we should move on?"

"No," Rosalie moaned. "We just got settled. I don't want to start on my sophomore year in high school again!"

"You could keep your present age, of course," Carlisle said.

"And have to move again that much sooner?" she countered.

Carlisle shrugged.

"I *like* it here! There's so little sun, we get to be almost *normal*."

"Well, we certainly don't have to decide now. We can wait and see if it becomes necessary. Edward seems certain of the Swan girl's silence."

Rosalie snorted.

But I was no longer worried about Rose. I could see that she would go along with Carlisle's decision, not matter how infuriated she was with me. Their conversation had moved on to unimportant details.

Jasper remained unmoved.

I understood why. Before he and Alice had met, he'd lived in a combat zone, a relentless theater of war. He knew the consequences of flouting the rules—he'd seen the grisly aftermath with his own eyes.

It said much that he had not tried to calm Rosalie down with his extra faculties, nor did he now try to rile her up. He was holding himself aloof from this discussion—above it.

"Jasper," I said.

He met my gaze, his face expressionless.

"She won't pay for my mistake. I won't allow that."

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"She benefits from it, then? She should have died today, Edward. I would only set that right."

I repeated myself, emphasizing each word. "I will not allow it."

His eyebrows shot up. He wasn't expecting this—he hadn't imagined that I would act to stop him.

He shook his head once. "I won't let Alice live in danger, even a slight danger. You don't feel about anyone the way I feel about her, Edward, and you haven't lived through what I've lived through, whether you've seen my memories or not. You don't understand."

"I'm not disputing that, Jasper. But I'm telling you now, I won't allow you to hurt Isabella Swan."

We stared at each other—not glaring, but measuring the opposition. I felt him sample the mood around me, testing my determination.

"Jazz," Alice said, interrupting us.

He held my gaze for a moment more, and then looked at her. "Don't bother telling me you can protect yourself, Alice. I already know that. I've still got to—"

"That's not what I'm going say," Alice interrupted. "I was going to ask you for a favor."

I saw what was on her mind, and my mouth fell open with an audible gasp. I stared at her, shocked, only vaguely aware that everyone besides Alice and Jasper was now eyeing me warily.

"I know you love me. Thanks. But I would really appreciate it if you didn't try to kill Bella. First of all, Edward's serious and I don't want you two fighting. Secondly, she's my friend. At least, she's *going* to be."

It was clear as glass in her head: Alice, smiling, with her icy white arm around the girl's warm, fragile shoulders. And Bella was smiling, too, her arm around Alice's waist.

The vision was rock solid; only the timing of it was unsure.

"But…Alice…" Jasper gasped. I couldn't manage to turn my head to see his expression. I couldn't tear myself away from the image in Alice's head in order to hear his.

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"I'm going to love her someday, Jazz. I'll be very put out with you if you don't let her be."

I was still locked into Alice's thoughts. I saw the future shimmer as Jasper's resolve floundered in the face of her unexpected request.

"Ah," she sighed—his indecision had cleared a new future. "See? Bella's not going to say anything. There's nothing to worry about."

The way she said the girl's name…like they were already close confidants…

"Alice," I choked. "What…does this…?"

"I told you there was a change coming. I don't know, Edward." But she locked her jaw, and I could see that there was more. She was trying not to think about it; she was focusing very hard on Jasper suddenly, though he was too stunned to have progressed much in his decision making.

She did this sometimes when she was trying to keep something from me.

"What, Alice? What are you hiding?"

I heard Emmett grumble. He always got frustrated when Alice and I had these kinds of conversations.

She shook her head, trying to not let me in.

"Is it about the girl?" I demanded. "Is it about Bella?"

She had her teeth gritted in concentration, but when I spoke Bella's name, she slipped. Her slip only lasted the tiniest portion of a second, but that was long enough.

"NO!" I shouted. I heard my chair hit the floor, and only then realized I was on my feet.

"Edward!" Carlisle was on his feet, too, his arm on my shoulder. I was barely aware of him.

"It's solidifying," Alice whispered. "Every minute you're more decided. There're really only two ways left for her. It's one or the other, Edward."

I could see what she saw…but I could not accept it.

"No," I said again; there was no volume to my denial. My legs felt hollow, and I had to brace myself against the table.

"Will somebody *please* let the rest of us in on the mystery?" Emmett complained.

"I have to leave," I whispered to Alice, ignoring him.

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"Edward, we've already been over that," Emmett said loudly. "That's the best way to start the girl talking. Besides, if you take off, we won't know for sure if she's talking or not. You have to stay and deal with this."

"I don't see you going anywhere, Edward," Alice told me. "I don't know if you *can* leave anymore." *Think about it,* she added silently. *Think about leaving.*

I saw what she meant. Yes, the idea of never seeing the girl again was…painful. But it was also necessary. I couldn't sanction either future I'd apparently condemned her to.

I'm not entirely sure of Jasper, Edward, Alice went on. *If you leave, if he thinks she's a danger to us…*

"I don't hear that," I contradicted her, still only halfway aware of our audience. Jasper was wavering. He would not do something that would hurt Alice.

Not right this moment. Will you risk her life, leave her undefended?

"Why are you doing this to me?" I groaned. My head fell into my hands.

I was not Bella's protector. I could not be that. Wasn't Alice's divided future enough proof of that?

I love her, too. Or I will. It's not the same, but I want her around for that.

"Love her, *too?*" I whispered, incredulous.

She sighed. *You are* so *blind, Edward. Can't you see where you're headed? Can't you see where you already are? It's more inevitable than the sun rising in the east. See what I see…*

I shook my head, horrified. "No." I tried to shut out the visions she revealed to me. "I don't have to follow that course. I'll leave. I *will* change the future."

"You can try," she said, her voice skeptical.

"Oh, *come on*!" Emmett bellowed.

"Pay attention," Rose hissed at him. "Alice sees him falling for a *human!* How classically Edward!" She made a gagging sound.

I scarcely heard her.

"What?" Emmett said, startled. Then his booming laugh echoed through the room. "Is that what's been going on?" He laughed again. "Tough break, Edward."

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I felt his hand on my shoulder, and I shook it off absently. I couldn't pay attention to him.

"*Fall* for a human?" Esme repeated in a stunned voice. "For the girl he saved today? Fall in *love* with her?"

"What do you see, Alice? Exactly," Jasper demanded.

She turned toward him; I continued to stare numbly at the side of her face.

"It all depends on whether he is strong enough or not. Either he'll kill her himself" —she turned to meet my gaze again, glaring— "which would *really* irritate me, Edward, not to mention what it would do to *you*—" she faced Jasper again, "or she'll be one of us someday."

Someone gasped; I didn't look to see who.

"That's not going to happen!" I was shouting again. "Either one!"

Alice didn't seem to hear me. "It all depends," she repeated. "He may be just strong enough not to kill her—but it will be close. It will take an amazing amount of control," she mused. "More even than Carlisle has. He may be *just* strong enough… The only thing he's not strong enough to do is stay away from her. That's a lost cause."

I couldn't find my voice. No one else seemed to be able to either. The room was still.

I stared at Alice, and everyone else stared at me. I could see my own horrified expression from five different viewpoints.

After a long moment, Carlisle sighed.

"Well, this…complicates things."

"I'll say," Emmett agreed. His voice was still close to laughter. Trust Emmett to find the joke in the destruction of my life.

"I suppose the plans remain the same, though," Carlisle said thoughtfully. "We'll stay, and watch. Obviously, no one will…hurt the girl."

I stiffened.

"No," Jasper said quietly. "I can agree to that. If Alice sees only two ways—"

"No!" My voice was not a shout or a growl or a cry of despair, but some combination of the three. "No!"

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I had to leave, to be away from the noise of their thoughts—Rosalie's self-righteous disgust, Emmett's humor, Carlisle's never ending patience…

Worse: Alice's confidence. Jasper's confidence in that confidence.

Worst of all: Esme's…*joy*.

I stalked out of the room. Esme touched my arm as I passed, but I didn't acknowledge the gesture.

I was running before I was out of the house. I cleared the river in one bound, and raced into the forest. The rain was back again, falling so heavily that I was drenched in a few moments. I liked the thick sheet of water—it made a wall between me and the rest of the world. It closed me in, let me be alone.

I ran due east, over and through the mountains without breaking my straight course, until I could see the lights of Seattle on the other side of the sound. I stopped before I touched the borders of human civilization.

Shut in by the rain, all alone, I finally made myself look at what I had done—at the way I had mutilated the future.

First, the vision of Alice and the girl with their arms around each other—the trust and friendship was so obvious it shouted from the image. Bella's wide chocolate eyes were not bewildered in this vision, but still full of secrets—in this moment, they seemed to be happy secrets. She did not flinch away from Alice's cold arm.

What did it mean? How much did she know? In that still-life moment from the future, what did she think of *me*?

Then the other image, so much the same, yet now colored by horror. Alice and Bella, their arms still wrapped around each other in trusting friendship. But now there was no difference between those arms—both were white, smooth as marble, hard as steel. Bella's wide eyes were no longer chocolate. The irises were a shocking, vivid crimson. The secrets in them were unfathomable—acceptance or desolation? It was impossible to tell. Her face was cold and immortal.

I shuddered. I could not suppress the questions, similar, but different: What did it mean—how had this come about? And what did she think of me now?

I could answer that last one. If I forced her into this empty half-life through my weakness and selfishness, surely she would hate me.

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But there was one more horrifying image—worse than any image I'd ever held inside my head.

My own eyes, deep crimson with human blood, the eyes of the monster. Bella's broken body in my arms, ashy white, drained, lifeless. It was so concrete, so clear.

I couldn't stand to see this. Could not bear it. I tried to banish it from my mind, tried to see something else, anything else. Tried to see again the expression on her living face that had obstructed my view for the last chapter of my existence. All to no avail.

Alice's bleak vision filled my head, and I writhed internally with the agony it caused. Meanwhile, the monster in me was overflowing with glee, jubilant at the likelihood of his success. It sickened me.

This could not be allowed. There had to be a way to circumvent the future. I would not let Alice's visions direct me. I could choose a different path. There was always a choice.

There had to be.

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5. Invitations

High school. Purgatory no longer, it was now purely hell. Torment and fire…yes, I had both.

I was doing everything correctly now. Every "i" dotted, every "t" crossed. No one could complain that I was shirking my responsibilities.

To please Esme and protect the others, I stayed in Forks. I returned to my old schedule. I hunted no more than the rest of them. Everyday, I attended high school and played human. Everyday, I listened carefully for anything new about the Cullens—there never was anything new. The girl did not speak one word of her suspicions. She just repeated the same story again and again—I'd been standing with her and then pulled her out of the way—till her eager listeners got bored and stopped looking for more details. There was no danger. My hasty action had hurt no one.

No one but myself.

I was determined to change the future. Not the easiest task to set for oneself, but there was no other choice that I could live with.

Alice said that I would not be strong enough to stay away from the girl. I would prove her wrong.

I'd thought the first day would be the hardest. By the end of it, I'd been *sure* that was the case. I'd been wrong, though.

It had rankled, knowing that I would hurt the girl. I'd comforted myself with the fact that her pain would be nothing more than a pinprick—just a tiny sting of rejection—compared to mine. Bella was human, and she knew that I was something else, something wrong, something frightening. She would probably be more relieved than wounded when I turned my face away from her and pretended that she didn't exist.

"Hello, Edward," she'd greeted me, that first day back in biology. Her voice had been pleasant, friendly, one hundred and eighty degrees from the last time I'd spoken with her.

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Why? What did the change mean? Had she forgotten? Decided she had imagined the whole episode? Could she possibly have forgiven me for not following through on my promise?

The questions had burned like the thirst that attacked me every time I breathed.

Just one moment to look in her eyes. Just to see if I could read the answers there…

No. I could not allow myself even that. Not if I was going to change the future.

I'd moved my chin an inch in her direction without looking away from the front of the room. I'd nodded once, and then turned my face straight forward.

She did not speak to me again.

That afternoon, as soon as school was finished, my role played, I ran to Seattle as I had the day before. It seemed that I could handle the aching just slightly better when I was flying over the ground, turning everything around me into a green blur.

This run became my daily habit.

Did I love her? I did not think so. Not yet. Alice's glimpses of that future had stuck with me, though, and I could see how easy it would be to fall into loving Bella. It would be exactly like falling: effortless. Not letting myself love her was the opposite of falling—it was pulling myself up a cliff-face, hand over hand, the task as grueling as if I had no more than mortal strength.

More than a month passed, and every day it got harder. That made no sense to me—I kept waiting to get over it, to have it get easier. This must be what Alice had meant when she'd predicted that I would not be able to stay away from the girl. She had seen the escalation of the pain. But I could handle pain.

I would not destroy Bella's future. If I was destined to love her, then wasn't avoiding her the very least I could do?

Avoiding her was about the limit of what I could bear, though. I could pretend to ignore her, and never look her way. I could pretend that she was of no interest to me. But that was the extent, just pretense and not reality.

I still hung on every breath she took, every word she said.

I lumped my torments into four categories.

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The first two were familiar. Her scent and her silence. Or, rather—to take the responsibility on myself where it belonged—my thirst and my curiosity.

The thirst was the most primal of my torments. It was my habit now to simply not breathe at all in Biology. Of course, there were always the exceptions—when I had to answer a question or something of the sort, and I would need my breath to speak. Each time I tasted the air around the girl, it was the same as the first day—fire and need and brutal violence desperate to break free. It was hard to cling even slightly to reason or restraint in those moments. And, just like that first day, the monster in me would roar, so close to the surface…

The curiosity was the most constant of my torments. The question was never out of my mind: *What is she thinking* now*?* When I heard her quietly sigh. When she twisted a lock of hair absently around her finger. When she threw her books down with more force than usual. When she rushed to class late. When she tapped her foot impatiently against the floor. Each movement caught in my peripheral vision was a maddening mystery. When she spoke to the other human students, I analyzed her every word and tone. Was she speaking her thoughts, or what she thought she should say? It often sounded to me like she was trying to say what her audience expected, and this reminded me of my family and our daily life of illusion—we were better at it than she was. Unless I wrong about that, just imagining things. Why would she have to play a role? She was one of them—a human teenager.

Mike Newton was the most surprising of my torments. Who would have ever dreamed that such a generic, boring mortal could be so infuriating? To be fair, I should have felt some gratitude to the annoying boy; more than the others, he kept the girl talking. I learned so much about her through these conversations—I was still compiling my list—but, contrarily, Mike's assistance with this project only aggravated me more. I didn't want Mike to be the one that unlocked her secrets. I wanted to do that.

It helped that he never noticed her small revelations, her little slips. He knew nothing about her. He'd created a Bella in his head that didn't exist—a girl just as generic as he was. He hadn't observed the unselfishness and bravery that set her apart from other humans, he didn't hear the abnormal maturity of her spoken thoughts. He didn't perceive that when she spoke of her mother, she sounded like a parent speaking of

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a child rather than the other way around—loving, indulgent, slightly amused, and fiercely protective. He didn't hear the patience in her voice when she feigned interest in his rambling stories, and didn't guess at the kindness behind that patience.

Through her conversations with Mike, I was able to add the most important quality to my list, the most revealing of them all, as simple as it was rare. Bella was *good*. All the other things added up to that whole—kind and self-effacing and unselfish and loving and brave—she was good through and through.

These helpful discoveries did not warm me to the boy, however. The possessive way he viewed Bella—as if she were an acquisition to be made—provoked me almost as much as his crude fantasies about her. He was becoming more confident of her, too, as the time passed, for she seemed to prefer him over those he considered his rivals—Tyler Crowley, Eric Yorkie, and even, sporadically, myself. He would routinely sit on her side of our table before class began, chattering at her, encouraged by her smiles. Just polite smiles, I told myself. All the same, I frequently amused myself by imagining backhanding him across the room and into the far wall… It probably wouldn't injure him fatally…

Mike didn't often think of me as a rival. After the accident, he'd worried that Bella and I would bond from the shared experience, but obviously the opposite had resulted. Back then, he had still been bothered that I'd singled Bella out over her peers for attention. But now I ignored her just as thoroughly as the others, and he grew complacent.

What was she thinking now? Did she welcome his attention?

And, finally, the last of my torments, the most painful: Bella's indifference. As I ignored her, she ignored me. She never tried to speak to me again. For all I knew, she never thought about me at all.

This might have driven me mad—or even broken my resolution to change the future—except that she sometimes stared at me like she had before. I didn't see it for myself, as I could not allow myself to look at her, but Alice always warned us when she was about to stare; the others were still wary of the girl's problematic knowledge.

It eased some of the pain that she gazed at me from across a distance, every now and then. Of course, she could just be wondering what kind of a freak I was.

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"Bella's going to stare at Edward in a minute. Look normal," Alice said one Tuesday in March, and the others were careful to fidget and shift their weight like humans; absolute stillness was a marker of our kind.

I paid attention to how often she looked my direction. It pleased me, though it should not, that the frequency did not decline as the time passed. I didn't know what it meant, but it made me feel better.

Alice sighed. *I wish…*

"Stay out of it, Alice," I said under my breath. "It's not going to happen."

She pouted. Alice was anxious to form her envisioned friendship with Bella. In a strange way, she missed the girl she didn't know.

I'll admit, you're better than I thought. You've got the future all snarled up and senseless again. I hope you're happy.

"It makes plenty of sense to me."

She snorted delicately.

I tried to shut her out, too impatient for conversation. I wasn't in a very good mood—tenser than I let any of them see. Only Jasper was aware of how tightly wound I was, feeling the stress emanate out of me with his unique ability to both sense and influence the moods of others. He didn't understand the reasons behind the moods, though, and—since I was constantly in a foul mood these days—he disregarded it.

Today would be a hard one. Harder than the day before, as was the pattern.

Mike Newton, the odious boy whom I could not allow myself to rival, was going to ask Bella on a date.

A girl's choice dance was on the near horizon, and he'd been hoping very much that Bella would ask him. That she had not done so had rattled his confidence. Now he was in an uncomfortable bind—I enjoyed his discomfort more than I should—because Jessica Stanley had just asked him to the dance. He didn't want to say "yes," still hopeful that Bella would choose him (and prove him the victor over his rivals), but he didn't want to say "no" and end up missing the dance altogether. Jessica, hurt by his hesitation and guessing the reason behind it, was thinking daggers at Bella. Again, I had the instinct to place myself between Jessica's angry thoughts and Bella. I understood the instinct better now, but that only made it more frustrating when I could not act on it.

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To think it had come to this! I was utterly fixated on the petty high school dramas that I'd once held so in contempt.

Mike was working up his nerve as he walked Bella to biology. I listened to his struggles as I waited for them to arrive. The boy was weak. He had waited for this dance purposely, afraid to make his infatuation known before she had shown a marked preference for him. He didn't want to make himself vulnerable to rejection, preferring that she make that leap first.

Coward.

He sat down on our table again, comfortable with long familiarity, and I imagined the sound it would make if his body hit the opposite wall with enough force to break most of his bones.

"So," he said to the girl, his eyes on the floor. "Jessica asked me to the spring dance."

"That's great," Bella answered immediately and with enthusiasm. It was hard not to smile as her tone sunk in to Mike's awareness. He'd been hoping for dismay. "You'll have a lot of fun with Jessica."

He scrambled for the right response. "Well…" he hesitated, and almost chickened out. Then he rallied. "I told her I had to think about it."

"Why would you do that?" she demanded. Her tone was one of disapproval, but there was the faintest hint of relief there as well.

What did *that* mean? An unexpected, intense fury made my hands clench into fists.

Mike did not hear the relief. His face was red with blood—fierce as I suddenly felt, this seemed like an invitation—and he looked at the floor again as he spoke.

"I was wondering if…well, if you might be planning to ask me."

Bella hesitated.

In that moment of her hesitation, I saw the future more clearly than Alice ever had.

The girl might say yes to Mike's unspoken question now, and she might not, but either way, someday soon, she would say yes to someone. She was lovely and intriguing, and human males were not oblivious to this fact. Whether she would settle for someone

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in this lackluster crowd, or wait until she was free from Forks, the day would come that she *would* say yes.

I saw her life as I had before—college, career…love, marriage. I saw her on her father's arm again, dressed in gauzy white, her face flushed with happiness as she moved to the sound of Wagner's march.

The pain was more than anything I'd felt before. A human would have to be on the point of death to feel this pain—a human would not live through it.

And not just pain, but outright *rage*.

The fury ached for some kind of physical outlet. Though this insignificant, undeserving boy might not be the one that Bella would say yes to, I yearned to crush his skull in my hand, to let him stand as a representative for whoever it would be.

I didn't understand this emotion—it was such a tangle of pain and rage and desire and despair. I had never felt it before; I couldn't put a name to it.

"Mike, I think you should tell her yes," Bella said in a gentle voice.

Mike's hopes plummeted. I would have enjoyed that under other circumstances, but I was lost in the aftershock of the pain—and the remorse for what the pain and rage had done to me.

Alice was right. I was *not* strong enough.

Right now, Alice would be watching the future spin and twist, become mangled again. Would this please her?

"Did you already ask someone?" Mike asked sullenly. He glanced at me, suspicious for the first time in many weeks. I realized I had betrayed my interest; my head was inclined in Bella's direction.

The wild envy in his thoughts—envy for whoever this girl preferred to him—suddenly put a name to my unnamed emotion.

I was jealous.

"No," the girl said with a trace of humor in her voice. "I'm not going to the dance at all."

Through all the remorse and anger, I felt relief at her words. Suddenly, I was considering *my* rivals.

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"Why not?" Mike asked, his tone almost rude. It offended me that he used this tone with her. I bit back a growl.

"I'm going to Seattle that Saturday," she answered.

The curiosity was not as vicious as it would have been before—now that I was fully intending to find out the answers to everything. I would know the wheres and whys of this new revelation soon enough.

Mike's tone turned unpleasantly wheedling. "Can't you go some other weekend?"

"Sorry, no." Bella was brusquer now. "So you shouldn't make Jess wait any longer—it's rude."

Her concern for Jessica's feelings fanned the flames of my jealousy. This Seattle trip was clearly an excuse to say no—did she refuse purely out of loyalty to her friend? She was more than selfless enough for that. Did she actually wish she could say yes? Or were both guesses wrong? Was she interested in someone else?

"Yeah, you're right," Mike mumbled, so demoralized that I almost felt pity for him. Almost.

He dropped his eyes from the girl, cutting off my view of her face in his thoughts.

I wasn't going to tolerate that.

I turned to read her face myself, for the first time in more than a month. It was a sharp relief to allow myself this, like a gasp of air to long-submerged human lungs.

Her eyes were closed, and her hands pressed against the sides of her face. Her shoulders curved inward defensively. She shook her head ever so slightly, as if she were trying to push some thought from her mind.

Frustrating. Fascinating.

Mr. Banner's voice pulled her from her reverie, and her eyes slowly opened. She looked at me immediately, perhaps sensing my gaze. She stared up into my eyes with the same bewildered expression that had haunted me for so long.

I didn't feel the remorse or the guilt or the rage in that second. I knew they would come again, and come soon, but for this one moment I rode a strange, jittery high. As if I had triumphed, rather than lost.

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She didn't look away, though I stared with inappropriate intensity, trying vainly to read her thoughts through her liquid brown eyes. They were full of questions, rather than answers.

I could see the reflection of my own eyes, and I saw that they were black with thirst. It had been nearly two weeks since my last hunting trip; this was not the safest day for my will to crumble. But the blackness did not seem to frighten her. She still did not look away, and a soft, devastatingly appealing pink began to color her skin.

What was she thinking now?

I almost asked the question aloud, but at that moment Mr. Banner called my name. I picked the correct answer out of his head while I glanced briefly in his direction.

I sucked in a quick breath. "The Krebs Cycle."

Thirst scorched down my throat—tightening my muscles and filling my mouth with venom—and I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate through the desire for her blood that raged inside me.

The monster was stronger than before. The monster was rejoicing. He embraced this dual future that gave him an even, fifty-fifty chance at what he craved so viciously. The third, shaky future I'd tried to construct through willpower alone had crumbled—destroyed by common jealously, of all things—and he was so much closer to his goal.

The remorse and the guilt burned with the thirst, and, if I'd had the ability to produce tears, they would have filled my eyes now.

What had I done?

Knowing the battle was already lost, there seemed to be no reason to resist what I wanted; I turned to stare at the girl again.

She had hidden in her hair, but I could see through a parting in the tresses that her cheek was deep crimson now.

The monster liked that.

She did not meet my gaze again, but she twisted a strand of her dark hair nervously between her fingers. Her delicate fingers, her fragile wrist—they were so breakable, looking for all the world like just my breath could snap them.

No, no, no. I could not do this. She was too breakable, too good, too precious to deserve this fate. I couldn't allow my life to collide with hers, to destroy it.

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But I couldn't stay away from her either. Alice was right about that.

The monster inside me hissed with frustration as I wavered, leaning first one way, then the other.

My brief hour with her passed all too quickly, as I vacillated between the rock and the hard place. The bell rang, and she started collecting her things without looking at me. This disappointed me, but I could hardly expect otherwise. The way I had treated her since the accident was inexcusable.

"Bella?" I said, unable to stop myself. My willpower already lay in shreds.

She hesitated before looking at me; when she turned, her expression was guarded, distrustful.

I reminded myself that she had every right to distrust me. That she should.

She waited for me to continue, but I just stared at her, reading her face. I pulled in shallow mouthfuls of air at regular intervals, fighting my thirst.

"What?" she finally said. "Are you speaking to me again?" There was an edge of resentment to her tone that was, like her anger, endearing. It made me want to smile.

I wasn't sure how to answer her question. *Was* I speaking to her again, in the sense that she meant?

No. Not if I could help it. I would try to help it.

"No, not really," I told her.

She closed her eyes, which frustrated me. It cut off my best avenue of access to her feelings. She took a long, slow breath without opening her eyes. Her jaw was locked.

Eyes still closed, she spoke. Surely this was not a normal human way to converse. Why did she do it?

"Then what do you want, Edward?"

The sound of my name on her lips did strange things to my body. If I'd had a heartbeat, it would have quickened.

But how to answer her?

With the truth, I decided. I would be as truthful as I could with her from now on. I didn't want to deserve her distrust, even if earning her trust was impossible.

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"I'm sorry," I told her. That was truer than she would ever know. Unfortunately, I could only safely apologize for the trivial. "I'm being very rude, I know. But it's better this way, really."

I would be better for her if I could keep it up, continue to be rude. Could I?

Her eyes opened, their expression still wary.

"I don't know what you mean."

I tried to get as much of a warning through to her as was allowed. "It's better if we're not friends." Surely, she could sense that much. She was a bright girl. "Trust me."

Her eyes tightened, and I remembered that I had said those words to her before—just before breaking a promise. I winced when her teeth clenched together—she clearly remembered, too.

"It's too bad you didn't figure that out earlier," she said angrily. "You could have saved yourself all this regret."

I stared at her in shock. What did she know of my regrets?

"Regret? Regret for what?" I demanded.

"For not just letting that stupid van squish me!" she snapped.

I froze, stunned.

How could she be thinking *that*? Saving her life was the one acceptable thing I'd done since I met her. The one thing that I was not ashamed of. The one and only thing that made me glad I existed at all. I'd been fighting to keep her alive since the first moment I'd caught her scent. How could she think this of me? How dare she question my one good deed in all this mess?

"You think I regret saving your life?"

"I *know* you do," she retorted.

Her estimation of my intentions left me seething. "You don't know anything."

How confusing and incomprehensible the workings of her mind were! She must not think in the same way as other humans at all. That must be the explanation behind her mental silence. She was entirely other.

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She jerked her face away, gritting her teeth again. Her cheeks were flushed, with anger this time. She slammed her books together in a pile, yanked them up into her arms, and marched toward the door without meeting my stare.

Even irritated as I was, it was impossible not to find her anger a bit entertaining.

She walked stiffly, without looking where she was going, and her foot caught on the lip of the doorway. She stumbled, and her things all crashed to the ground. Instead of bending to get them, she stood rigidly straight, not even looking down, as if she were not sure the books were worth retrieving.

I managed not to laugh.

No one was here to watch me; I flitted to her side, and had her books put in order before she looked down.

She bent halfway, saw me, and then froze. I handed her books back to her, making sure that my icy skin never touched hers.

"Thank you," she said in a cold, severe voice.

Her tone brought back my irritation.

"You're welcome," I said just as coldly.

She wrenched herself upright and stomped away to her next class.

I watched until I could no longer see her angry figure.

Spanish passed in a blur. Mrs. Goff never questioned my abstraction—she knew my Spanish was superior to hers, and she gave me a great deal of latitude—leaving me free to think.

So, I couldn't ignore the girl. That much was obvious. But did it mean I had no choice but to destroy her? That could *not* be the only available future. There had to be some other choice, some delicate balance. I tried to think of a way…

I didn't pay much attention to Emmett until the hour was nearly up. He was curious—Emmett was not overly intuitive about the shades in other's moods, but he could see the obvious change in me. He wondered what had happened to remove the unrelenting glower from my face. He struggled to define the change, and finally decided that I looked *hopeful*.

Hopeful? Is that what it looked like from the outside?

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I pondered the idea of hope as we walked to the Volvo, wondering what exactly I should be hoping *for*.

But I didn't have long to ponder. Sensitive as I always was to thoughts about the girl, the sound of Bella's name in the heads of…of my rivals, I suppose I had to admit, caught my attention. Eric and Tyler, having heard—with much satisfaction—of Mike's failure, were preparing to make their moves.

Eric was already in place, positioned against her truck where she could not avoid him. Tyler's class was being held late to receive an assignment, and he was in a desperate hurry to catch her before she escaped.

This I had to see.

"Wait for the others here, all right?" I murmured to Emmett.

He eyed me suspiciously, but then shrugged and nodded.

Kid's lost his mind, he thought, amused by my odd request.

I saw Bella on her way out of the gym, and I waited where she would not see me for her to pass. As she got closer to Eric's ambush, I strode forward, setting my pace so that I would walk by at the right moment.

I watched her body stiffen when she caught sight of the boy waiting for her. She froze for a moment, then relaxed and moved forward.

"Hi, Eric," I heard her call in a friendly voice.

I was abruptly and unexpectedly anxious. What if this gangly teen with his unhealthy skin was somehow pleasing to her?

Eric swallowed loudly, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Hi, Bella."

She seemed unconscious of his nervousness.

"What's up?" she asked, unlocking her truck without looking at his frightened expression.

"Uh, I was just wondering…if you would go to the spring dance with me?" His voice broke.

She finally looked up. Was she taken aback, or pleased? Eric couldn't meet her gaze, so I couldn't see her face in his mind.

"I thought it was girl's choice," she said, sounding flustered.

"Well, yeah," he agreed wretchedly.

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This pitiable boy did not irritate me as much as Mike Newton did, but I couldn't find it in myself to feel sympathy for his angst until after Bella had answered him in a gentle voice.

"Thank you for asking me, but I'm going to be in Seattle that day."

He'd already heard this; still, it was a disappointment.

"Oh," he mumbled, barely daring to raise his eyes to the level of her nose. "Maybe next time."

"Sure," she agreed. Then she bit down on her lip, as if she regretted leaving him a loophole. I liked that.

Eric slumped forward and walked away, headed in the wrong direction from his car, his only thought escape.

I passed her in that moment, and heard her sigh of relief. I laughed.

She whirled at the sound, but I stared straight ahead, trying to keep my lips from twitching in amusement.

Tyler was behind me, almost running in his hurry to catch her before she could drive away. He was bolder and more confident than the other two; he'd only waited to approach Bella this long because he'd respected Mike's prior claim.

I wanted him to succeed in catching her for two reasons. If—as I was beginning to suspect—all this attention was annoying to Bella, I wanted to enjoy watching her reaction. But, if it was not—if Tyler's invitation was the one she'd been hoping for—then I wanted to know that, too.

I measured Tyler Crowley as a rival, knowing it was wrong to do so. He seemed tediously average and unremarkable to me, but what did I know of Bella's preferences? Maybe she liked average boys…

I winced at that thought. I could never be an average boy. How foolish it was to set myself up as a rival for her affections. How could she ever care for someone who was, by any estimation, a monster?

She was too good for a monster.

I ought to have let her escape, but my inexcusable curiosity kept me from doing what was right. Again. But what if Tyler missed his chance now, only to contact her

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later when I would have no way of knowing the outcome? I pulled my Volvo out into the narrow lane, blocking her exit.

Emmett and the others were on their way, but he'd described my strange behavior to them, and they were walking slowly, watching me, trying to decipher what I was doing.

I watched the girl in my rearview mirror. She glowered toward the back of my car without meeting my gaze, looking as if she wished she were driving a tank rather than a rusted Chevy.

Tyler hurried to his car and got in line behind her, grateful for my inexplicable behavior. He waved at her, trying to catch her attention, but she didn't notice. He waited a moment, and then left his car, sauntering up to her passenger side window. He tapped on the glass.

She jumped, and then stared at him in confusion. After a second, she rolled the window down manually, seeming to have some trouble with it.

"I'm sorry, Tyler," she said, her voice irritated. "I'm stuck behind Cullen."

She said my surname in a hard voice—she was still angry with me.

"Oh, I know," Tyler said, undeterred by her mood. "I just wanted to ask you something while we're trapped here."

His grin was cocky.

I was gratified by the way she blanched at his obvious intent.

"Will you ask me to the spring dance?" he asked, no thought of defeat in his head.

"I'm not going to be in town, Tyler," she told him, irritation still plain in her voice.

"Yeah, Mike said that."

"Then why—?" she stared to ask.

He shrugged. "I was hoping you were just letting him down easy."

Her eyes flashed, then cooled. "Sorry, Tyler," she said, not sounding sorry at all. "I really am going to be out of town."

He accepted that excuse, his self-assurance untouched. "That's cool. We still have prom."

He strutted back to his car.

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I was right to have waited for this.

The horrified expression on her face was priceless. It told me what I should not so desperately need to know—that she had no feelings for any of these human males who wished to court her.

Also, her expression was possibly the funniest thing I'd ever seen.

My family arrived then, confused by the fact that I was, for a change, rocking with laughter rather than scowling murderously at everything in sight.

What's so funny? Emmett wanted to know.

I just shook my head while I also shook with fresh laughter as Bella revved her noisy engine angrily. She looked like she was wishing for a tank again.

"Let's go!" Rosalie hissed impatiently. "Stop being an idiot. If you *can*."

Her words didn't annoy me—I was too entertained. But I did as she asked.

No one spoke to me on the way home. I continued to chuckle every now and again, thinking of Bella's face.

As I turned on to the drive—speeding up now that there were no witnesses—Alice ruined my mood.

"So do I get to talk to Bella now?" she asked suddenly, without considering the words first, thus giving me no warning.

"No," I snapped.

"Not fair! What am I waiting for?"

"I haven't decided anything, Alice."

"Whatever, Edward."

In her head, Bella's two destinies were clear again.

"What's the point in getting to know her?" I mumbled, suddenly morose. "If I'm just going to kill her?"

Alice hesitated for a second. "You have a point," she admitted.

I took the final hairpin turn at ninety miles an hour, and then screeched to a stop an inch from the back garage wall.

"Enjoy your run," Rosalie said smugly as I threw myself out of the car.

But I didn't go running today. Instead, I went hunting.

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The others were scheduled to hunt tomorrow, but I couldn't afford to be thirsty now. I overdid it, drinking more than necessary, glutting myself again—a small grouping of elk and one black bear I was lucky to stumble across this early in the year. I was so full it was uncomfortable. Why couldn't that be enough? Why did her scent have to be so much stronger than anything else?

I had hunted in preparation for the next day, but, when I could hunt no more and the sun was still hours and hours from rising, I knew that the next day was not soon enough.

The jittery high swept through me again when I realized that I was going to go find the girl.

I argued with myself all the way back to Forks, but my less noble side won the argument, and I went ahead with my indefensible plan. The monster was restless but well-fettered. I knew I would keep a safe distance from her. I only wanted to know where she was. I just wanted to see her face.

It was past midnight, and Bella's house was dark and quiet. Her truck was parked against the curb, her father's police cruiser in the driveway. There were no conscious thoughts anywhere in the neighborhood. I watched the house for a moment from the blackness of the forest that bordered it on the east. The front door would probably be locked—not a problem, except that I didn't want to leave a broken door as evidence behind me. I decided to try the upstairs window first. Not many people would bother installing a lock there.

I crossed the open yard and scaled the face of the house in half a second. Dangling from the eave above the window by one hand, I looked through the glass, and my breath stopped.

It was her room. I could see her in the one small bed, her covers on the floor and her sheets twisted around her legs. As I watched, she twitched restlessly and threw one arm over her head. She did not sleep soundly, at least not this night. Did she sense the danger near her?

I was repulsed by myself as I watched her toss again. How was I any better than some sick peeping tom? I *wasn't* any better. I was much, much worse.

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I relaxed my fingertips, about to let myself drop. But first I allowed myself one long look at her face.

It was not peaceful. The little furrow was there between her eyebrows, the corners of her lips turned down. Her lips trembled, and then parted.

"Okay, Mom," she muttered.

Bella talked in her sleep.

Curiosity flared, overpowering self-disgust. The lure of those unprotected, unconsciously spoken thoughts was impossibly tempting.

I tried the window, and it was not locked, though it stuck due to long disuse. I slid it slowly aside, cringing at each faint groan of the metal frame. I would have to find some oil for next time…

Next time? I shook my head, disgusted again.

I eased myself silently through the half-opened window.

Her room was small—disorganized but not unclean. There were books piled on the floor beside her bed, their spines facing away from me, and CDs scattered by her inexpensive CD player—the one on top was just a clear jewel case. Stacks of papers surrounded a computer that looked like it belonged in a museum dedicated to obsolete technologies. Shoes dotted the wooden floor.

I wanted very much to go read the titles of her books and CDs, but I'd promised myself that I would keep my distance; instead, I went to sit the old rocking chair in the far corner of the room.

Had I really once thought her average-looking? I thought of that first day, and my disgust for the boys who were so immediately intrigued with her. But when I remembered her face in their minds now, I could not understand why I had not found her beautiful immediately. It seemed an obvious thing.

Right now—with her dark hair tangled and wild around her pale face, wearing a threadbare t-shirt full of holes with tatty sweatpants, her features relaxed in unconsciousness, her full lips slightly parted—she took my breath away. Or would have, I thought wryly, if I were breathing.

She did not speak. Perhaps her dream had ended.

I stared at her face and tried to think of some way to make the future bearable.

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Hurting her was not bearable. Did that mean my only choice was to try to leave again?

The others could not argue with me now. My absence would not put anyone in danger. There would be no suspicion, nothing to link anyone's thoughts back to the accident.

I wavered as I had this afternoon, and nothing seemed possible.

I could not hope to rival the human boys, whether these specific boys appealed to her or not. I was a monster. How could she see me as anything else? If she knew the truth about me, it would frighten and repulse her. Like the intended victim in a horror movie, she would run away, shrieking in terror.

I remembered her first day in biology…and knew that this was exactly the right reaction for her to have.

It was foolishness to imagine that if had I been the one to ask her to the silly dance, she would have cancelled her hastily-made plans and agreed to go with me.

I was not the one she was destined to say yes to. It was someone else, someone human and warm. And I could not even let myself—someday, when that yes was said—hunt him down and kill him, because she deserved him, whoever he was. She deserved happiness and love with whomever she chose.

I owed it to her to do the right thing now; I could no longer pretend that I was only *in danger* of loving this girl.

After all, it really didn't matter if I left, because Bella could never see me the way I wished she would. Never see me as someone worthy of love.

Never.

Could a dead, frozen heart break? It felt like mine would.

"Edward," Bella said.

I froze, staring at her unopened eyes.

Had she woken, caught me here? She *looked* asleep, yet her voice had been so clear…

She sighed a quiet sigh, and then moved restlessly again, rolling to her side—still fast asleep and dreaming.

"Edward," she mumbled softly.

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She was dreaming of me.

Could a dead, frozen heart beat again? It felt like mine was about to.

"Stay," she sighed. "Don't go. Please…don't go."

She was dreaming of me, and it wasn't even a nightmare. She wanted me to stay with her, there in her dream.

I struggled to find words to name the feelings that flooded through me, but I had no words strong enough to hold them. For a long moment, I drowned in them.

When I surfaced, I was not the same man I had been.

My life was an unending, unchanging midnight. It must, by necessity, always be midnight for me. So how was it possible that the sun was rising now, in the middle of my midnight?

At the time that I had become a vampire, trading my soul and my mortality for immortality in the searing pain of transformation, I had truly been frozen. My body had turned into something more like rock than flesh, enduring and unchanging. My *self*, also, had frozen as it was—my personality, my likes and my dislikes, my moods and my desires; all were fixed in place.

It was the same for the rest of them. We were all frozen. Living stone.

When change came for one of us, it was a rare and permanent thing. I had seen it happen with Carlisle, and then a decade later with Rosalie. Love had changed them in an eternal way, a way that never faded. More than eighty years had passed since Carlisle had found Esme, and yet he still looked at her with the incredulous eyes of first love. It would always be that way for them.

It would always be that way for me, too. I would always love this fragile human girl, for the rest of my limitless existence.

I gazed at her unconscious face, feeling this love for her settle into every portion of my stone body.

She slept more peacefully now, a slight smile on her lips.

Always watching her, I began to plot.

I loved her, and so I would try to be strong enough to leave her. I knew I wasn't that strong now. I would work on that one. But perhaps I was strong enough to circumvent the future in another way.

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Alice had seen only two futures for Bella, and now I understood them both.

Loving her would not keep me from killing her, if I let myself make mistakes.

Yet I could not feel the monster now, could not find him anywhere in me. Perhaps love had silenced him forever. If I killed her now, it would not be intentional, only a horrible accident.

I would have to be inordinately careful. I would never, ever be able to let my guard down. I would have to control my every breath. I would have to keep an always cautious distance.

I would not make mistakes.

I finally understood that second future. I'd been baffled by that vision—what could possibly happen to result in Bella becoming a prisoner to this immortal half-life? Now—devastated by longing for the girl—I could understand how I might, in unforgivable selfishness, ask my father for that favor. Ask him to take away her life and her soul so that I could keep her forever.

She deserved better.

But I saw one more future, one thin wire that I might be able to walk, if I could keep my balance.

Could I do it? Be with her and leave her human?

Deliberately, I took a deep breath, and then another, letting her scent rip through me like wildfire. The room was thick with her perfume; her fragrance was layered on every surface. My head swam, but I fought the spinning. I would have to get used to this, if I were going to attempt any kind of relationship with her. I took another deep, burning breath.

I watched her sleeping until the sun rose behind the eastern clouds, plotting and breathing.

I got home just after the others had left for school. I changed quickly, avoiding Esme's questioning eyes. She saw the feverish light in my face, and she felt both worry and relief. My long melancholy had pained her, and she was glad it seemed to be over.

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I ran to school, arriving a few seconds after my siblings did. They did not turn, though Alice at least must have known that I stood here in the thick woods that bordered the pavement. I waited until no one was looking, and then I strolled casually from between the trees into the lot full of parked cars.

I heard Bella's truck rumbling around the corner, and I paused behind a Suburban, where I could watch without being seen.

She drove into the lot, glaring at my Volvo for a long moment before she parked in one of the most distant spaces, a frown on her face.

It was strange to remember that she was probably still angry with me, and with good reason.

I wanted to laugh at myself—or kick myself. All my plotting and planning was entirely moot if she didn't care for me, too, wasn't it? Her dream could have been about something completely random. I was such an arrogant fool.

Well, it was so much the better for her if she didn't care for me. That wouldn't stop me from pursuing her, but I would give her fair warning as I pursued. I owed her that.

I walked silently forward, wondering how best to approach her.

She made it easy. Her truck key slipped through her fingers as she got out, and fell into a deep puddle.

She reached down, but I got to it first, retrieving it before she had to put her fingers in the cold water.

I leaned back against her truck as she started and then straightened up.

"How do you *do* that?" she demanded.

Yes, she was still angry.

I offered her the key. "Do what?"

She held her hand out, and I dropped the key in her palm. I took a deep breath, pulling in her scent.

"Appear out of thin air," she clarified.

"Bella, it's not my fault if you are exceptionally unobservant." The words were wry, almost a joke. Was there anything she didn't see?

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Did she hear how my voice wrapped around her name like a caress?

She glared at me, not appreciating my humor. Her heartbeat sped—from anger? From fear? After a moment, she looked down.

"Why the traffic jam last night?" she asked without meeting my eyes. "I thought you were supposed to be pretending I don't exist, not irritating me to death."

Still very angry. It was going to take some effort to make things right with her. I remembered my resolve to be truthful with her…

"That was for Tyler's sake, not mine. I had to give him his chance." And then I laughed. I couldn't help it, thinking of her expression yesterday.

"You—" she gasped, and then broke off, appearing to be too furious to finish. There it was—that same expression. I choked back another laugh. She was mad enough already.

"And I'm not pretending you don't exist," I finished. It was right to keep this casual, teasing. She would not understand if I let her see how I really felt. I would frighten her. I had to keep my feelings in check, keep things light…

"So you *are* trying to irritate me to death? Since Tyler's van didn't do the job?"

A quick flash of anger pulsed through me. Could she honestly believe that?

It was irrational for me to be so affronted—she didn't know of the transformation that had happened in the night. But I was angry all the same.

"Bella, you are utterly absurd," I snapped.

Her face flushed, and she turned her back on me. She began to walk away.

Remorse. I had no right to my anger.

"Wait," I pleaded.

She did not stop, so I followed after her.

"I'm sorry, that was rude. I'm not saying it isn't true" —it *was* absurd to imagine that I wanted her harmed in any way— "but it was rude to say it, anyway."

"Why won't you leave me alone?"

Believe me, I wanted to say. *I've tried*.

Oh, and also, I'm wretchedly in love with you.

Keep it light.

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"I wanted to ask you something, but you sidetracked me." A course of action had just occurred to me, and I laughed.

"Do you have a multiple personality disorder?" she asked.

It must seem that way. My mood was erratic, so many new emotions coursing through me.

"You're doing it again," I pointed out.

She sighed. "Fine then. What do you want to ask?"

"I was wondering if, a week from Saturday…" I watched the shock cross her face, and choked back another laugh. "You know, the day of the spring dance—"

She cut me off, finally returning her eyes to mine. "Are you trying to be *funny*?"

Yes. "Will you let me finish?"

She waited in silence, her teeth pressing into her soft lower lip.

That sight distracted me for a second. Strange, unfamiliar reactions stirred deep in my forgotten human core. I tried to shake them off so I could play my role.

"I heard you say that you were going to Seattle that day, and I was wondering if you wanted a ride?" I offered. I'd realized that, better than just questioning her about her plans, I might *share* them.

She stared at me blankly. "What?"

"Do you want a ride to Seattle?" Alone in a car with her—my throat burned at the thought. I took a deep breath. *Get used to it.*

"With who?" she asked, her eyes wide and bewildered again.

"Myself, obviously," I said slowly.

"Why?"

Was it really such as shock that I would want her company? She must have applied the worst possible meaning to my past behavior.

"Well," I said as casually as possible, "I was planning to go to Seattle in the next few weeks, and, to be honest, I'm not sure if your truck can make it." It seemed safer to tease her than to allow myself to be serious.

"My truck works just fine, thank you very much for your concern," she said in the same surprised voice. She started walking again. I kept pace with her.

She hadn't really said no, so I pressed that advantage.

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Would she say no? What would I do if she did?

"But can your truck make it there on one tank of gas?"

"I don't see how that is any of your business," she grumbled.

That still wasn't a no. And her heart was beating faster again, her breath coming more quickly.

"The wasting of finite resources is everyone's business."

"Honestly, Edward, I can't keep up with you. I thought you didn't want to be my friend."

A thrill shot through me when she spoke my name.

How to keep it light and yet be honest at the same time? Well, it was more important to be honest. Especially on this point.

"I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not that I didn't want to be."

"Oh, thanks, now that's *all* cleared up," she said sarcastically.

She paused, under the edge of the cafeteria's roof, and met my gaze again. Her heartbeats stuttered. Was she afraid?

I chose my words carefully. No, I could not leave her, but maybe she would be smart enough to leave me, before it was too late.

"It would be more…*prudent* for you not to be my friend." Staring into the melted chocolate depths of her eyes, I lost my hold on *light*. "But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Bella." The words burned with much too much fervor.

Her breathing stopped and, in the second it took for it to restart, that worried me. How much had I scared her? Well, I would find out.

"Will you go to Seattle with me?" I demanded, point blank.

She nodded, her heart drumming loudly.

Yes. She'd said yes to *me*.

And then my conscious smote me. What would this cost her?

"You really should stay away from me," I warned her. Did she hear me? Would she escape the future I was threatening her with? Couldn't I do anything to save her from *me*?

Keep it light, I shouted at myself. "I'll see you in class."

I had to concentrate to stop myself from running as I fled.

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6. Blood Type

I followed her all day through other people's eyes, barely aware of my own surroundings.

Not Mike Newton's eyes, because I couldn't stand any more of his offensive fantasies, and not Jessica Stanley's, because her resentment toward Bella made me angry in a way that was not safe for the petty girl. Angela Weber was a good choice when her eyes were available; she was kind—her head was an easy place to be. And then sometimes it was the teachers who provided the best view.

I was surprised, watching her stumble through the day—tripping over cracks in the sidewalk, stray books, and, most often, her own feet—that the people I eavesdropped on thought of Bella as *clumsy*.

I considered that. It was true that she often had trouble staying upright. I remembered her stumbling into the desk that first day, sliding around on the ice before the accident, falling over the low lip of the doorframe yesterday… How odd, they were right. She *was* clumsy.

I didn't know why this was so funny to me, but I laughed out loud as I walked from American History to English and several people shot me wary looks. How had I never noticed this before? Perhaps because there was something very graceful about her in stillness, the way she held her head, the arch of her neck…

There was nothing graceful about her now. Mr. Varner watched as she caught the toe of her boot on the carpet and literally fell into her chair.

I laughed again.

The time moved with incredible sluggishness while I waited for my chance to see her with my own eyes. Finally, the bell rang. I strode quickly to the cafeteria to secure my spot. I was one of the first there. I chose a table that was usually empty, and was sure to remain that way with me seated here.

When my family entered and saw me sitting alone in a new place, they were not surprised. Alice must have warned them.

Rosalie stalked past me without a glance.

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Idiot.

Rosalie and I had never had an easy relationship—I'd offended her the very first time she'd heard me speak, and it was downhill from there—but it seemed like she was even more ill-tempered than usual the last few days. I sighed. Rosalie made everything about herself.

Jasper gave me half a smile as he walked by.

Good luck, he thought doubtfully.

Emmett rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Lost his mind, poor kid.

Alice was beaming, her teeth shining too brightly.

Can I talk to Bella now*??*

"Keep out of it," I said under my breath.

Her face fell, and then brightened again.

Fine. Be stubborn. It's only a matter of time.

I sighed again.

Don't forget about today's biology lab, she reminded me.

I nodded. No, I hadn't forgotten that.

While I waited for Bella to arrive, I followed her in the eyes of the freshman who was walking behind Jessica on his way to the cafeteria. Jessica was babbling about the upcoming dance, but Bella said nothing in response. Not that Jessica gave her much of a chance.

The moment Bella walked through the door, her eyes flashed to the table where my siblings sat. She stared for a moment, and then her forehead crumpled and her eyes dropped to the floor. She hadn't noticed me here.

She looked so…*sad*. I felt a powerful urge to get up and go to her side, to comfort her somehow, only I didn't know what she would find comforting. I had no idea what made her look that way. Jessica continued to jabber about the dance. Was Bella sad that she was going to miss it? That didn't seem likely…

But that could be remedied, if she wished.

She bought a drink for her lunch and nothing else. Was that right? Didn't she need more nutrition than that? I'd never paid much attention to a human's diet before.

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Humans were quite exasperatingly fragile! There were a million different things to worry about…

"Edward Cullen is staring at you again," I heard Jessica say. "I wonder why he's sitting alone today?"

I was grateful to Jessica—though she was even more resentful now—because Bella's head snapped up and her eyes searched until they met mine.

There was no trace of sadness in her face now. I let myself hope that she'd been sad because she'd thought I'd left school early, and that hope made me smile.

I motioned with my finger for her to join me. She looked so startled by this that I wanted to tease her again.

So I winked, and her mouth fell open.

"Does he mean *you*?" Jessica asked rudely.

"Maybe he needs help with his Biology homework," she said in a low, uncertain voice. "Um, I'd better go see what he wants."

This was another yes.

She stumbled twice on her way to my table, though there was nothing in her way but perfectly even linoleum. Seriously, how *had* I missed this before? I'd been paying more attention to her silent thoughts, I supposed… What else had I missed?

Keep it honest, keep it light, I chanted to myself.

She stopped behind the chair across from me, hesitating. I inhaled deeply, through my nose this time rather than my mouth.

Feel the burn, I thought dryly.

"Why don't you sit with me today?" I asked her.

She pulled the chair out and sat, staring at me the whole while. She seemed nervous, but her physical acceptance was yet another yes.

I waited for her to speak.

It took a moment, but, finally, she said, "This is different."

"Well…" I hesitated. "I decided as long as I was going to hell, I might as well do it thoroughly."

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What had made me say that? I supposed it was honest, at least. And perhaps she'd hear the unsubtle warning my words implied. Maybe she would realize that she should get up and walk away as quickly as possible…

She didn't get up. She stared at me, waiting, as if I'd left my sentence unfinished.

"You know I don't have any idea what you mean," she said when I didn't continue.

That was a relief. I smiled.

"I know."

It was hard to ignore the thoughts screaming at me from behind her back—and I wanted to change the subject anyway.

"I think your friends are angry at me for stealing you."

This did not appear to concern her. "They'll survive."

"I may not give you back, though." I didn't even know if I was trying to be honest now, or just trying to tease her again. Being near her made it hard to make sense of my own thoughts.

Bella swallowed loudly.

I laughed at her expression. "You look worried." It really *shouldn't* be funny… She should worry.

"No." She was a bad liar; it didn't help that her voice broke. "Surprised, actually…. What brought this on?"

"I told you," I reminded her. "I got tired of trying to stay away from you. So I'm giving up." I held my smile in place with a bit of effort. This wasn't working at all—trying to be honest and casual at the same time.

"Giving up?" she repeated, baffled.

"Yes—giving up trying to be good." And, apparently, giving up trying to be casual. "I'm just going to do what I want now, and let the chips fall where they may." That was honest enough. Let her see my selfishness. Let that warn her, too.

"You lost me again."

I was selfish enough to be glad that this was the case. "I always say too much when I'm talking to you—that's one of the problems."

A rather insignificant problem, compared to the rest.

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"Don't worry," she reassured me. "I don't understand any of it."

Good. Then she'd stay. "I'm counting on that."

"So, in plain English, are we friends now?"

I pondered that for a second. "Friends…" I repeated. I didn't like the sound of that. It wasn't enough.

"Or not," she mumbled, looking embarrassed.

Did she think I didn't like her that much?

I smiled. "Well, we can try, I suppose. But I'm warning you now that I'm not a good friend for you."

I waited for her response, torn in two—wishing she would finally hear and understand, thinking I might die if she did. How melodramatic. I was turning into such a human.

Her heart beat faster. "You say that a lot."

"Yes, because you're not listening to me," I said, too intense again. "I'm still waiting for you to believe it. If you're smart, you'll avoid me."

Ah, but would I allow her to do that, if she tried?

Her eyes tightened. "I think you've made your opinion on the subject of my intellect clear, too."

I wasn't exactly sure what she meant, but I smiled in apology, guessing that I must have offended her accidentally.

"So," she said slowly. "As long as I'm being…not smart, we'll try to be friends?"

"That sounds about right."

She looked down, staring intently at the lemonade bottle in her hands.

The old curiosity tormented me.

"What are you thinking?" I asked—it was a relief to say the words out loud at last.

She met my gaze, and her breathing sped while her cheeks flushed faint pink. I inhaled, tasting that in the air.

"I'm trying to figure out what you are."

I held the smile on my face, locking my features that way, while panic twisted through my body.

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Of course she was wondering that. She wasn't stupid. I couldn't hope for her to be oblivious to something so obvious.

"Are you having any luck with that?" I asked as lightly as I could manage.

"Not too much," she admitted.

I chuckled in sudden relief. "What are your theories?"

They couldn't be worse than the truth, no matter what she'd come up with.

Her cheeks turned brighter red, and she said nothing. I could feel the warmth of her blush in the air.

I tried using my persuasive tone on her. It worked well on normal humans.

"Won't you tell me?" I smiled encouragingly.

She shook her head. "Too embarrassing."

Ugh. Not knowing was worse than anything else. Why would her speculations embarrass her? I couldn't stand not knowing.

"That's *really* frustrating, you know."

My complaint sparked something in her. Her eyes flashed and her words flowed more swiftly than usual.

"No, I can't *imagine* why that would be frustrating at all—just because someone refuses to tell you what they're thinking, even if all the while they're making cryptic little remarks specifically designed to keep you up at night wondering what they could possibly mean…now, why would that be frustrating?"

I frowned at her, upset to realize that she was right. I wasn't being fair.

She went on. "Or better, say that person also did a wide range of bizarre things—from saving your life under impossible circumstances one day to treating you like a pariah the next, and he never explained any of that either, even after he promised. That, also, would be *very* non-frustrating."

It was the longest speech I'd ever heard her make, and it gave me a new quality for my list.

"You've got a bit of a temper, don't you?"

"I don't like double standards."

She was completely justified in her irritation, of course.

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I stared at Bella, wondering how I could possibly do anything right by her, until the silent shouting in Mike Newton's head distracted me.

He was so irate that it made me chuckle.

"What?" she demanded.

"Your boyfriend seems to think I'm being unpleasant to you—he's debating whether or not to come break up our fight." I would love to see him try. I laughed again.

"I don't know who you're talking about," she said in an icy voice. "But I'm sure you're wrong anyway."

I very much enjoyed the way she disowned him with her dismissive sentence.

"I'm not. I told you, most people are easy to read."

"Except me, of course."

"Yes. Except for you." Did she have to be the exception to everything? Wouldn't it have been more fair—considering everything else I had to deal with now—if I could have at least heard *something* from her head? Was that so much to ask? "I wonder why that is?"

I stared into her eyes, trying again…

She looked away. She opened her lemonade and took a quick drink, her eyes on the table.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked.

"No." She eyed the empty table between us. "You?"

"No, I'm not hungry," I said. I was definitely not that.

She stared at the table her lips pursed. I waited.

"Could you do me a favor?" she asked, suddenly meeting my gaze again.

What would she want from me? Would she ask for the truth that I wasn't allowed to tell her—the truth I didn't want her to ever, ever know?

"That depends on what you want."

"It's not much," she promised.

I waited, curious again.

"I just wondered…" she said slowly, staring at the lemonade bottle, tracing its lip with her littlest finger. "If you could warn me beforehand the next time you decide to ignore me for my own good? Just so I'm prepared."

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She wanted a warning? Then being ignored by me must be a bad thing… I smiled.

"That sounds fair," I agreed.

"Thanks," she said, looking up. Her face was so relieved that I wanted to laugh with my own relief.

"Then can I have one in return?" I asked hopefully.

"One," she allowed.

"Tell me *one* theory."

She flushed. "Not that one."

"You didn't qualify, you just promised one answer," I argued.

"And you've broken promises yourself," she argued back.

She had me there.

"Just one theory—I won't laugh."

"Yes, you will." She seemed very sure of that, though I couldn't imagine anything that would be funny about it.

I gave persuasion another try. I stared deep into her eyes—an easy thing to do, with eyes so deep—and whispered, "Please?"

She blinked, and her face went blank.

Well, that wasn't exactly the reaction I'd been going for.

"Er, what?" she asked. She looked dizzy. What was wrong with her?

But I wasn't giving up yet.

"Please tell me just one little theory," I pleaded in my soft, non-scary voice, holding her eyes in mine.

To my surprise and satisfaction, it finally worked.

"Um, well, bitten by a radioactive spider?"

Comic books? No wonder she thought I would laugh.

"That's not very creative," I chided her, trying to hide my fresh relief.

"I'm sorry, that's all I've got," she said, offended.

This relieved me even more. I was able to tease her again.

"You're not even close."

"No spiders?"

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"Nope."

"And no radioactivity?"

"None."

"Dang," she sighed.

"Kryptonite doesn't bother me either," I said quickly—before she could ask about *bites*—and then I had to laugh, because she thought I was a superhero.

"You're not supposed to laugh, remember?"

I pressed my lips together.

"I'll figure it out eventually," she promised.

And when she did, she would run.

"I wish you wouldn't try," I said, all teasing gone.

"Because…?"

I owed her honesty. Still, I tried to smile, to make my words sound less threatening. "What if I'm not a superhero? What if I'm the bad guy?"

Her eyes widened by a fraction and her lips fell slightly apart. "Oh," she said. And then, after another second, "I see."

She'd finally heard me.

"Do you?" I asked, working to conceal my agony.

"You're dangerous?" she guessed. Her breathing hiked, and her heart raced.

I couldn't answer her. Was this my last moment with her? Would she run now? Could I be allowed to tell her that I loved her before she left? Or would that frighten her more?

"But not bad," she whispered, shaking her head, no fear in her clear eyes. "No, I don't believe that you're bad."

"You're wrong," I breathed.

Of course I was bad. Wasn't I rejoicing now, that she thought better of me than I deserved? If I were a good person, I would have stayed away from her.

I stretched my hand across the table, reaching for the lid to her lemonade bottle as an excuse. She did not flinch away from my suddenly closer hand. She really was not afraid of me. Not yet.

I spun the lid like a top, watching it instead of her. My thoughts were in a snarl.

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Run, Bella, run. I couldn't make myself say the words out loud.

She jumped to her feet. "We're going to be late," she said, just as I'd started to worry that she'd somehow heard my silent warning.

"I'm not going to class."

"Why not?"

Because I don't want to kill you. "It's healthy to ditch class now and then."

To be precise, it was healthier for the humans if the vampires ditched on days when human blood would be spilt. Mr. Banner was blood typing today. Alice had already ditched her morning class.

"Well, I'm going," she said. This didn't surprise me. She was responsible—she always did the right thing.

She was my opposite.

"I'll see you later then," I said, trying for casual again, staring down at the whirling lid. *And, by the way, I adore you…in frightening, dangerous ways.*

She hesitated, and I hoped for a moment that she would stay with me after all. But the bell rang and she hurried away.

I waited until she was gone, and then I put the lid in my pocket—a souvenir of this most consequential conversation—and walked through the rain to my car.

I put on my favorite calming CD—the same one I'd listened to that first day—but I wasn't hearing Debussy's notes for long. Other notes were running through my head, a fragment of a tune that pleased and intrigued me. I turned down the stereo and listened to the music in my head, playing with the fragment until it evolved into a fuller harmony. Instinctively, my fingers moved in the air over imaginary piano keys.

The new composition was really coming along when my attention was caught by a wave of mental anguish.

I looked toward the distress.

Is she going to pass out? What do I do? Mike panicked.

A hundred yards away, Mike Newton was lowering Bella's limp body to the sidewalk. She slumped unresponsively against the wet concrete, her eyes closed, her skin chalky as a corpse.

I almost took the door off the car.

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"Bella?" I shouted.

There was no change in her lifeless face when I yelled her name.

My whole body went colder than ice.

I was aware of Mike's aggravated surprise as I sifted furiously through his thoughts. He was only thinking of his anger toward me, so I didn't know what was wrong with Bella. If he'd done something to harm her, I would annihilate him.

"What's wrong—is she hurt?" I demanded, trying to focus his thoughts. It was maddening to have to walk at a human pace. I should not have called attention to my approach.

Then I could hear her heart beating and her even breath. As I watched, she squeezed her eyes more tightly shut. That eased some of my panic.

I saw a flicker of memories in Mike's head, a splash of images from the Biology room. Bella's head on our table, her fair skin turning green. Drops of red against the white cards…

Blood typing.

I stopped where I was, holding my breath. Her scent was one thing, her flowing blood was another altogether.

"I think she's fainted," Mike said, anxious and resentful at the same time. "I don't know what happened, she didn't even stick her finger."

Relief washed through me, and I breathed again, tasting the air. Ah, I could smell the tiny flow of Mike Newton's puncture wound. Once, that might have appealed to me.

I knelt beside her while Mike hovered next to me, furious at my intervention.

"Bella. Can you hear me?"

"No," she moaned. "Go away."

The relief was so exquisite that I laughed. She was fine.

"I was taking her to the nurse," Mike said. "But she wouldn't go any farther."

"I'll take her. You can go back to class," I said dismissively.

Mike's teeth clenched together. "No. I'm supposed to do it."

I wasn't going to stand around arguing with the wretch.

Thrilled and terrified, half-grateful to and half-aggrieved by the predicament which made touching her a necessity, I gently lifted Bella from the sidewalk and held her

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in my arms, touching only her clothes, keeping as much distance between our bodies as possible. I was striding forward in the same movement, in a hurry to have her safe—farther away from me, in other words.

Her eyes popped open, astonished.

"Put me down," she ordered in a weak voice—embarrassed again, I guessed from her expression. She didn't like to show weakness.

I barely heard Mike's shouted protest behind us.

"You look awful," I told her, grinning because there was nothing wrong with her but a light head and a weak stomach.

"Put me back on the sidewalk," she said. Her lips were white.

"So you faint at the sight of blood?" Could it get any more ironic?

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together.

"And not even your own blood," I added, my grin widening.

We were to the front office. The door was propped an inch open, and I kicked it out of my way.

Ms. Cope jumped, startled. "Oh, my," she gasped as she examined the ashen girl in my arms.

"She fainted in Biology," I explained, before her imagination could get too out of hand.

Ms. Cope hurried to open the door to the nurse's office. Bella's eyes were open again, watching her. I heard the elderly nurse's internal astonishment as I laid the girl carefully on the one shabby bed. As soon as Bella was out of my arms, I put the width of the room between us. My body was too excited, too eager, my muscles tense and the venom flowing. She was so warm and fragrant.

"She's just a little faint," I reassured Mrs. Hammond. "They're blood typing in biology."

She nodded, understanding now. "There's always one."

I stifled a laugh. Trust Bella to be that one.

"Just lie down for a minute, honey," Mrs. Hammond said. "It'll pass."

"I know," Bella said.

"Does this happen often?" the nurse asked.

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"Sometimes," Bella admitted.

I tried to disguise my laughter as coughing.

This brought me to the nurse's attention. "You can go back to class now," she said.

I looked her straight in the eye and lied with perfect confidence. "I'm supposed to stay with her."

Hmm. I wonder… oh well. Mrs. Hammond nodded.

It worked just fine on her. Why did Bella have to be so difficult?

"I'll go get you some ice for your forehead, dear," the nurse said, slightly uncomfortable from looking into my eyes—the way a human *should* be—and left the room.

"You were right," Bella moaned, closing her eyes.

What did she mean? I jumped to the worst conclusion: she'd accepted my warnings.

"I usually am," I said, trying to keep the amusement in my voice; it sounded sour now. "But about what in particular this time?"

"Ditching is healthy," she sighed.

Ah, relief again.

She was silent then. She just breathed slowly in and out. Her lips were beginning to turn pink. Her mouth was slightly out of balance, her lower lip just a little too full to match the top. Staring at her mouth made me feel strange. Made me want to move closer to her, which was not a good idea.

"You scared me for a minute there," I said—to restart the conversation so that I could hear her voice again. "I thought Newton was dragging your dead body off to bury it in the woods."

"Ha ha," she said.

"Honestly—I've seen corpses with better color." This was actually true. "I was concerned that I might have to avenge your murder." And I would have.

"Poor Mike," she sighed. "I'll bet he's mad."

Fury pulsed through me, but I contained it quickly. Her concern was surely just pity. She was kind. That was all.

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"He absolutely loathes me," I told her, cheered by that idea.

"You can't know that."

"I saw his face—I could tell." It was probably true that reading his face would have given me enough information to make that particular deduction. All this practice with Bella was sharpening my skill at reading human expressions.

"How did you see me? I thought you were ditching." Her face looked better—the green undertone had vanished from her translucent skin.

"I was in my car, listening to a CD."

Her expression twitched, like my very ordinary answer had surprised her somehow.

She opened her eyes again when Mrs. Hammond returned with an ice pack.

"Here you go, dear," the nurse said as she laid it across Bella's forehead. "You're looking better."

"I think I'm fine," Bella said, and she sat up while pulling the ice pack away. Of course. She didn't like to be taken care of.

Mrs. Hammond's wrinkled hands fluttered toward the girl, as if she were going to push her back down, but just then Ms. Cope opened the door to the office and leaned in. With her appearance came the smell of fresh blood, just a whiff.

Invisible in the office behind her, Mike Newton was still very angry, wishing the heavy boy he dragged now was the girl who was in here with me.

"We've got another one," Ms. Cope said.

Bella quickly jumped down from the cot, eager to be out of the spotlight.

"Here," she said, handing the compress back to Mrs. Hammond. "I don't need this."

Mike grunted as he half-shoved Lee Stevens through the door. Blood was still dripping down the hand Lee held to his face, trickling toward his wrist.

"Oh no." This was my cue to leave—and Bella's, too, it seemed. "Get out to the office, Bella."

She stared up at me with bewildered eyes.

"Trust me—go."

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She whirled and caught the door before it had swung shut, rushing through to the office. I followed a few inches behind her. Her swinging hair brushed my hand…

She turned to look at me, still wide-eyed.

"You actually listened to me." That was a first.

Her small nose wrinkled. "I smelled the blood."

I stared at her in blank surprise. "People can't smell blood."

"Well, I can—that's what makes me sick. It smells like rust…and salt."

My face froze, still staring.

Was she really even human? She *looked* human. She felt soft as a human. She smelled human—well, better actually. She acted human…sort of. But she didn't think like a human, or respond like one.

What other option was there, though?

"What?" she demanded.

"It's nothing."

Mike Newton interrupted us then, entering the room with resentful, violent thoughts.

"*You* look better," he said to her rudely.

My hand twitched, wanting to teach him some manners. I would have to watch myself, or I would end up actually killing this obnoxious boy.

"Just keep your hand in your pocket," she said. For one wild second, I thought she was talking to me.

"It's not bleeding anymore," he answered sullenly. "Are you going back to class?"

"Are you kidding? I'd just have to turn around and come back."

That was very good. I'd thought I was going to have to miss this whole hour with her, and now I got extra time instead. I felt greedy, a miser hording over each minute.

"Yeah, I guess…" Mike mumbled. "So are you going this weekend? To the beach?"

Ah, they had plans. Anger froze me in place. It was a group trip, though. I'd seen some of this in other students' heads. It wasn't just the two of them. I was still furious. I leaned motionlessly against the counter, trying to control myself.

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"Sure, I said I was in," she promised him.

So she'd said yes to him, too. The jealousy burned, more painful than thirst.

No, it was just a group outing, I tried to convince myself. She was just spending the day with friends. Nothing more.

"We're meeting at my dad's store, at ten." *And Cullen's NOT invited.*

"I'll be there," she said.

"I'll see you in Gym, then."

"See you," she replied.

He shuffled off to his class, his thoughts full of ire. *What does she see in that freak? Sure, he's rich, I guess. Chicks think he's hot, but I don't see that. Too…too perfect. I bet his dad experiments with plastic surgery on all of them. That's why they're all so white and pretty. It's not natural. And he's sort of…scary-looking. Sometimes, when he stares at me, I'd swear he's thinking about killing me… Freak…*

Mike wasn't entirely unperceptive.

"Gym," Bella repeated quietly. A groan.

I looked at her, and saw that she was sad about something again. I wasn't sure why, but it was clear that she didn't want to go to her next class with Mike, and I was all for that plan.

I went to her side and bent close to her face, feeling the warmth of her skin radiating out to my lips. I didn't dare breathe.

"I can take care of that," I murmured. "Go sit down and look pale."

She did as I asked, sitting in one of the folding chairs and leaning her head back against the wall, while, behind me, Ms. Cope came out of the back room and went to her desk. With her eyes closed, Bella looked as if she'd passed out again. Her full color hadn't returned yet.

I turned to the secretary. Hopefully Bella was paying attention to this, I thought sardonically. This was how a human was *supposed* to respond.

"Ms. Cope?" I asked, using my persuasive voice again.

Her eyelashes fluttered, and her heart sped up. *Too young, get a hold of yourself!*

"Yes?"

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That was interesting. When Shelly Cope's pulse quickened, it was because she found me physically attractive, not because she was frightened. I was used to that around human females…yet I hadn't considered that explanation for Bella's racing heart.

I rather liked that. Too much, in fact. I smiled, and Mrs. Cope's breathing got louder.

"Bella has gym next hour, and I don't think she feels well enough. Actually, I was thinking I should take her home now. Do you think you could excuse her from class?" I stared into her depthless eyes, enjoying the havoc that this wreaked on her thought processes. Was it possible that Bella…?

Mrs. Cope had to swallow loudly before she answered. "Do you need to be excused, too, Edward?"

"No, I have Mrs. Goff, she won't mind."

I wasn't paying much attention to her now. I was exploring this new possibility.

Hmm. I'd like to believe that Bella found me attractive like other humans did, but when did Bella ever have the same reactions as other humans? I shouldn't get my hopes up.

"Okay, it's all taken care of. You feel better, Bella."

Bella nodded weakly—overacting a bit.

"Can you walk, or do you want me to carry you again?" I asked, amused by her poor theatrics. I knew she would want to walk—she wouldn't want to be weak.

"I'll walk," she said.

Right again. I was getting better at this.

She got up, hesitating for a moment as if to check her balance. I held the door for her, and we walked out into the rain.

I watched her as she lifted her face to the light rain with her eyes closed, a slight smile on her lips. *What was she thinking?* Something about this action seemed off, and I quickly realized why the posture looked unfamiliar to me. Normal human girls wouldn't raise their faces to the drizzle that way; normal human girls usually wore makeup, even here in this wet place.

Bella never wore makeup, nor should she. The cosmetics industry made billions of dollars a year from women who were trying to attain skin like hers.

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"Thanks," she said, smiling at me now. "It's worth getting sick to miss Gym."

I stared across the campus, wondering how to prolong my time with her. "Anytime," I said.

"So are you going? This Saturday, I mean?" She sounded hopeful.

Ah, her hope was soothing. She wanted me with her, not Mike Newton. And I wanted to say yes. But there were many things to consider. For one, the sun would be shining this Saturday…

"Where are you all going, exactly?" I tried to keep my voice nonchalant, as if it didn't matter much. Mike had said *beach*, though. Not much chance of avoiding sunlight there.

"Down to La Push, to First Beach."

Damn. Well, it was impossible, then.

Anyway, Emmett would be irritated if I cancelled our plans.

I glanced down at her, smiling wryly. "I really don't think I was invited."

She sighed, already resigned. "I just invited you."

"Let's you and I not push poor Mike any further this week. We don't want him to snap." I thought about snapping *poor Mike* myself, and enjoyed the mental picture intensely.

"Mike-schmike," she said, dismissive again. I smiled widely.

And then she started to walk away from me.

Without thinking about my action, I reached out and caught her by the back of her rain jacket. She jerked to a stop.

"Where do you think you're going?" I was almost angry that she was leaving me. I hadn't had enough time with her. She couldn't go, not yet.

"I'm going home," she said, baffled as to why this should upset me.

"Didn't you hear me promise to take you safely home? Do you think I'm going to let you drive in your condition?" I knew she wouldn't like *that*—my implication of weakness on her part. But I needed to practice for the Seattle trip, anyway. See if I could handle her proximity in an enclosed space. This was a much shorter journey.

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"What condition?" she demanded. "And what about my truck?"

"I'll have Alice drop it off after school." I pulled her back to my car carefully, as I now knew that walking *forward* was challenging enough for her.

"Let go!" she said, twisting sideways and nearly tripping. I held one hand out to catch her, but she righted herself before it was necessary. I shouldn't be looking for excuses to touch her. That started me thinking about Ms. Cope's reaction to me, but I filed it away for later. There was much to be considered on that front.

I let her go beside the car, and she stumbled into the door. I would have to be even more careful, to take into account her poor balance…

"You are so *pushy*!"

"It's open."

I got in on my side and started the car. She held her body rigidly, still outside, though the rain had picked up and I knew she didn't like the cold and wet. Water was soaking through her thick hair, darkening it to near black.

"I am perfectly capable of driving myself home!"

Of course she was—I just wasn't capable of letting her go.

I rolled her window down and leaned toward her. "Get in, Bella."

Her eyes narrowed, and I guessed that she was debating whether or not to make a run for it.

"I'll just drag you back," I promised, enjoying the chagrin on her face when she realized I meant it.

Her chin stiffly in the air, she opened her door and climbed in. Her hair dripped on the leather and her boots squeaked against each other.

"This is completely unnecessary," she said coldly. I thought she looked embarrassed under the pique.

I just turned up the heater so she wouldn't be uncomfortable, and set the music to a nice background level. I drove out toward the exit, watching her from the corner of my eye. Her lower lip was jutting out stubbornly. I stared at this, examining how it made me feel… thinking of the secretary's reaction again…

Suddenly she looked at the stereo and smiled, her eyes widening. "Clair de Lune?" she asked.

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A fan of the classics? "You know Debussy?"

"Not well," she said. "My mother plays a lot of classical music around the house—I only know my favorites."

"It's one of my favorites, too." I stared at the rain, considering that. I actually had something in common with the girl. I'd begun to think that we were opposites in every way.

She seemed more relaxed now, staring at the rain like me, with unseeing eyes. I used her momentary distraction to experiment with breathing.

I inhaled carefully through my nose.

Potent.

I clutched the steering wheel tighter. The rain made her smell better. I wouldn't have thought that was possible. Stupidly, I was suddenly imaging how she would taste.

I tried to swallow against the burn in my throat, to think of something else.

"What is your mother like?" I asked as a distraction.

Bella smiled. "She looks a lot like me, but she's prettier."

I doubted that.

"I have too much Charlie in me," she went on. "She's more outgoing than I am, and braver."

I doubted that, too.

"She's irresponsible and slightly eccentric, and she's a very unpredictable cook. She's my best friend." Her voice had turned melancholy; her forehead creased.

Again, she sounded more like parent than child.

I stopped in front of her house, wondering too late if I was supposed to know where she lived. No, this wouldn't be suspicious in such a small town, with her father a public figure…

"How old are you, Bella?" She must be older than her peers. Perhaps she'd been late to start school, or been held back…that wasn't likely, though.

"I'm seventeen," she answered.

"You don't seem seventeen."

She laughed.

"What?"

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"My mom always says I was born thirty-five years old and that I get more middle-aged every year." She laughed again, and then sighed. "Well, someone has to be the adult."

This clarified things for me. I could see it now…how the irresponsible mother helped explain Bella's maturity. She'd had to grow up early, to become the caretaker. That's why she didn't like being cared for—she felt it was her job.

"You don't seem much like a junior in high school yourself," she said, pulling me from my reverie.

I grimaced. For everything I perceived about her, she perceived too much in return. I changed the subject.

"So why did your mother marry Phil?"

She hesitated a minute before answering. "My mother…she's very young for her age. I think Phil makes her feel even younger. At any rate, she's crazy about him." She shook her head indulgently.

"Do you approve?" I wondered.

"Does it matter?" she asked. "I want her to be happy…and he is who she wants."

The unselfishness of her comment would have shocked me, except that it fit in all too well with what I'd learned of her character.

"That's very generous…I wonder."

"What?"

"Would she extend the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice was?"

It was a foolish question, and I could not keep my voice casual while I asked it. How stupid to even consider someone approving of *me* for their daughter. How stupid to even think of Bella choosing me.

"I-I think so," she stuttered, reacting in some way to my gaze. Fear…or attraction?

"But she's the parent, after all. It's a little bit different," she finished.

I smiled wryly. "No one too scary then."

She grinned at me. "What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and extensive tattoos?"

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"That's one definition, I suppose." A very nonthreatening definition, to my mind.

"What's your definition?"

She always asked the wrong questions. Or exactly the right questions, maybe. The ones I didn't want to answer, at any rate.

"Do you think that *I* could be scary?" I asked her, trying to smile a little.

She thought it through before answering me in a serious voice. "Hmm…I think you *could* be, if you wanted to."

I was serious, too. "Are you frightened of me now?"

She answered at once, not thinking this one through. "No."

I smiled more easily. I did not think she was entirely telling the truth, but nor was she truly lying. She wasn't frightened enough to want to leave, at least. I wondered how she would feel if I told her she was having this discussion with a vampire. I cringed internally at her imagined reaction.

"So, now are you going to tell me about your family? It's got to be a much more interesting story than mine."

A more frightening one, at least.

"What do you want to know?" I asked cautiously.

"The Cullens adopted you?"

"Yes."

She hesitated, then spoke in a small voice. "What happened to your parents?"

This wasn't so hard; I wasn't even having to lie to her. "They died a very long time ago."

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, clearly worried about having hurt me.

She was worried about *me*.

"I don't really remember them that clearly," I assured her. "Carlisle and Esme have been my parents for a long time now."

"And you love them," she deduced.

I smiled. "Yes. I couldn't imagine two better people."

"You're very lucky."

"I know I am." In that one circumstance, the matter of parents, my luck could not be denied.

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"And your brother and sisters?"

If I let her push for too many details, I would have to lie. I glanced at the clock, disheartened that my time with her was up.

"My brother and sister, and Jasper and Rosalie for that matter, are going to be quite upset if they have to stand in the rain waiting for me."

"Oh, sorry, I guess you have to go."

She didn't move. She didn't want our time to be up, either. I liked that very, very much.

"And you probably want your truck back before Chief Swan gets home, so you don't have to tell him about the Biology incident." I grinned at the memory of her embarrassment in my arms.

"I'm sure he's already heard. There are no secrets in Forks." She said the name of the town with distinct distaste.

I laughed at her words. No secrets, indeed. "Have fun at the beach." I glanced at the pouring rain, knowing it would not last, and wishing more strongly than usual that it could. "Good weather for sunbathing." Well, it would be by Saturday. She would enjoy that.

"Won't I see you tomorrow?"

The worry in her tone pleased me.

"No. Emmett and I are starting the weekend early." I was mad at myself now for having made the plans. I could break them…but there was no such thing as too much hunting at this point, and my family was going to be concerned enough about my behavior without me revealing how obsessive I was turning.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, not sounded happy with my revelation.

Good.

"We're going to be hiking in the Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier." Emmett was eager for bear season.

"Oh, well, have fun," she said halfheartedly. Her lack of enthusiasm pleased me again.

As I stared at her, I began to feel almost agonized at the thought of saying even a temporary goodbye. She was just so soft and vulnerable. It seemed foolhardy to let her

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out of my sight, where anything could happen to her. And yet, the worst things that could happen to her would result from being with me.

"Will you do something for me this weekend?" I asked seriously.

She nodded, her eyes wide and bewildered by my intensity.

Keep it light.

"Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who just attract accidents like a magnet. So…try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, all right?"

I smiled ruefully at her, hoping she couldn't see the sadness in my eyes. How much I wished that she wasn't so much better off away from me, no matter what might happen to her there.

Run, Bella, run. I love you too much, for your good or mine.

She was offended by my teasing. She glared at me. "I'll see what I can do," she snapped, jumping out into the rain and slamming the door as hard as she could behind her.

Just like an angry kitten that believes it's a tiger.

I curled my hand around the key I'd just picked from her jacket pocket, and smiled as I drove away.

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7. Melody

I had to wait when I got back to school. The final hour wasn't out yet. That was good, because I had things to think about and I needed the alone time.

Her scent lingered in the car. I kept the windows up, letting it assault me, trying to get used to the feel of intentionally torching my throat.

Attraction.

It was a problematic thing to contemplate. So many sides to it, so many different meanings and levels. Not the same thing as love, but tied up in it inextricably.

I had no idea if Bella was attracted to me. (Would her mental silence somehow continue to get more and more frustrating until I went mad? Or was there a limit that I would eventually reach?)

I tried to compare her physical responses to others, like the secretary and Jessica Stanley, but the comparison was inconclusive. The same markers—changes in heart rate and breathing patterns—could just as easily mean fear or shock or anxiety as they did interest. It seemed unlikely that Bella could be entertaining the same kinds of thoughts that Jessica Stanley used to have. After all, Bella knew very well that there was something wrong with me, even if she didn't know what exactly it was. She had touched my icy skin, and then yanked her hand away from the chill.

And yet…as I remembered those fantasies that used to repulse me, but remembered them with Bella in Jessica's place…

I was breathing more quickly, the fire clawing up and down my throat.

What if it had been *Bella* imagining me with my arms wrapped around her fragile body? Feeling me pull her tightly against my chest and then cupping my hand under her chin? Brushing the heavy curtain of her hair back from her blushing face? Tracing the shape of her full lips with my fingertips? Leaning my face closer to hers, where I could feel the heat of her breath on my mouth? Moving closer still…

But then I flinched away from the daydream, knowing, as I had known when Jessica had imagined these things, what would happen if I got that close to her.

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Attraction was an impossible dilemma, because I was already too attracted to Bella in the worst way.

Did I want Bella to be attracted to me, a woman to a man?

That was the wrong question. The right question was *should* I want Bella to be attracted to me that way, and that answer was no. Because I was not a human man, and that wasn't fair to her.

With every fiber of my being, I ached to be a normal man, so that I could hold her in my arms without risking her life. So that I could be free to spin my own fantasies, fantasies that didn't end in with her blood on my hands, her blood glowing in my eyes.

My pursuit of her was indefensible. What kind of relationship could I offer her, when I couldn't risk touching her?

I hung my head in my hands.

It was all the more confusing because I had never felt so human in my whole life—not even when I *was* human, as far as I could recall. When I had been human, my thoughts had all been turned to a soldier's glory. The Great War had raged through most of my adolescence, and I'd been only nine months away from my eighteenth birthday when the influenza had struck… I had just vague impressions of those human years, murky memories that faded more with every passing decade. I remembered my mother most clearly, and felt an ancient ache when I thought of her face. I recalled dimly how much she had hated the future I'd raced eagerly toward, praying every night when she said grace at dinner that the "horrid war" would end… I had no memories of another kind of yearning. Besides my mother's love, there was no other love that had made me wish to stay…

This was entirely new to me. I had no parallels to draw, no comparisons to make.

The love I felt for Bella had come purely, but now the waters were muddied. I wanted very much to be able to touch her. Did she feel the same way?

That didn't matter, I tried to convince myself.

I stared at my white hands, hating their hardness, their coldness, their inhuman strength…

I jumped when the passenger door opened.

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Ha. Caught you by surprise. There's a first, Emmett thought as he slid into the seat. "I'll bet Mrs. Goff thinks you're on drugs, you've been so erratic lately. Where were you today?"

"I was…doing good deeds."

Huh?

I chuckled. "Caring for the sick, that kind of thing."

That confused him more, but then he inhaled and caught the scent in the car.

"Oh. The girl again?"

I grimaced.

This is getting weird.

"Tell me about it," I mumbled.

He inhaled again. "Hmm, she does have a quite a flavor, doesn't she?"

The snarl broke through my lips before his words had even registered all the way, an automatic response.

"Easy, kid, I'm just sayin.'"

The others arrived then. Rosalie noticed the scent at once and glowered at me, still not over her irritation. I wondered what her problem was, but all I could hear from her were insults.

I didn't like Jasper's reaction, either. Like Emmett, he noticed Bella's appeal. Not that the scent had, for either of them, a thousandth portion of the draw it had for me. I was still upset me that her blood was sweet to them. Jasper had poor control…

Alice skipped to my side of the car and held her hand out for Bella's truck key.

"I only saw that I was," she said—obscurely, as was her habit. "You'll have to tell me the whys."

"This doesn't mean—"

"I know, I know. I'll wait. It won't be long."

I sighed and gave her the key.

I followed her to Bella's house. The rain was pounding down like a million tiny hammers, so loud that maybe Bella's human ears couldn't hear the thunder of the truck's engine. I watched her window, but she didn't come to look out. Maybe she wasn't there. There were no thoughts to hear.

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It made me sad that I couldn't hear enough even to check on her—to make sure she was happy, or safe, at the least.

Alice climbed in the back and we sped home. The roads were empty, and so it only took a few minutes. We trooped into the house, and then went to our various pastimes.

Emmett and Jasper were in the middle of an elaborate game of chess, utilizing eight joined boards—spread out along the glass back wall—and their own complicated set of rules. They wouldn't let me play; only Alice would play games with me anymore.

Alice went to her computer just around the corner from them and I could hear her monitors sing to life. Alice was working on a fashion design project for Rosalie's wardrobe, but Rosalie did not join her today, to stand behind her and direct cut and color as Alice's hand traced over the touch sensitive screens (Carlisle and I had had to tweak that system a bit, given that most such screens responded to temperature). Instead, today Rosalie sprawled sullenly on the sofa and started flipping through twenty channels a second on the flat screen, never pausing. I could hear her trying to decide whether or not to go out to the garage and tune her BMW again.

Esme was upstairs, humming over a new set of blue prints.

Alice leaned her head around the wall after a moment and started mouthing Emmett's next moves—Emmett sat on the floor with his back to her—to Jasper, who kept his expression very smooth as he cut off Emmett's favorite knight.

And I, for the first time in so long that I felt ashamed, went to sit at the exquisite grand piano stationed just off the entryway.

I ran my hand gently up the scales, testing the pitch. The tuning was still perfect.

Upstairs, Esme paused what she was doing and cocked her head to the side.

I began the first line of the tune that had suggested itself to me in the car today, pleased that it sounded even better than I'd imagined.

Edward is playing again, Esme thought joyously, a smile breaking across her face. She got up from her desk, and flitted silently to the head of the stairs.

I added a harmonizing line, letting the central melody weave through it.

Esme sighed with contentment, sat down on the top step, and leaned her head against the banister. *A new song. It's been so long. What a lovely tune.*

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I let the melody lead in a new direction, following it with the bass line.

Edward is composing again? Rosalie thought, and her teeth clenched together in fierce resentment.

In that moment, she slipped, and I could read all her underlying outrage. I saw why she was in such a poor temper with me. Why killing Isabella Swan had not bothered her conscience at all.

With Rosalie, it was always about vanity.

The music came to an abrupt halt, and I laughed before I could help myself, a sharp bark of amusement that broke off quickly as I threw my hand over my mouth.

Rosalie turned to glare at me, her eyes sparking with chagrined fury.

Emmett and Jasper turned to stare, too, and I heard Esme's confusion. Esme was downstairs in a flash, pausing to glance between Rosalie and me.

"Don't stop, Edward," Esme encouraged after a strained moment.

I started playing again, turning my back on Rosalie while trying very hard to control the grin stretching across my face. She got to her feet and stalked out of the room, more angry than embarrassed. But certainly quite embarrassed.

If you say anything I will hunt you like a dog.

I smothered another laugh.

"What's wrong, Rose?" Emmett called after her. Rosalie didn't turn. She continued, back ramrod straight, to the garage and then squirmed under her car as if she could bury herself there.

"What's that about?" Emmett asked me.

"I don't have the faintest idea," I lied.

Emmett grumbled, frustrated.

"Keep playing," Esme urged. My hands had paused again.

I did as she asked, and she came to stand behind me, putting her hands on my shoulders.

The song was compelling, but incomplete. I toyed with a bridge, but it didn't seem right somehow.

"It's charming. Does it have a name?" Esme asked.

"Not yet."

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"Is there a story to it?" she asked, a smile in her voice. This gave her very great pleasure, and I felt guilty for having neglected my music for so long. It had been selfish.

"It's…a lullaby, I suppose." I got the bridge right then. It led easily to the next movement, taking on a life of its own.

"A lullaby," she repeated to herself.

There *was* a story to this melody, and once I saw that, the pieces fell into place effortlessly. The story was a sleeping girl in a narrow bed, dark hair thick and wild and twisted like seaweed across the pillow…

Alice left Jasper to his own devices and came to sit next to me on the bench. In her trilling, wind chime voice, she sketched out a wordless descant two octaves above the melody.

"I like it," I murmured. "But how about this?"

I added her line to the harmony—my hands were flying across the keys now to work all the pieces together—modifying it a bit, taking it in a new direction…

She caught the mood, and sung along.

"Yes. Perfect," I said.

Esme squeezed my shoulder.

But I could see the end now, with Alice's voice rising above the tune and taking it to another place. I could see how the song must end, because the sleeping girl was perfect just the way she was, and any change at all would be wrong, a sadness. The song drifted toward that realization, slower and lower now. Alice's voice lowered, too, and became solemn, a tone that belonged under the echoing arches of a candlelit cathedral.

I played the last note, and then bowed my head over the keys.

Esme stroked my hair. *It's going to be fine, Edward. This is going to work out for the best. You* deserve *happiness, my son. Fate owes you that.*

"Thanks," I whispered, wishing I could believe it.

Love doesn't always come in convenient packages.

I laughed once without humor.

You, out of everyone on this planet, are perhaps best equipped to deal with such a difficult quandary. You are the best and the brightest of us all.

I sighed. Every mother thought the same of her son.

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Esme was still full of joy that my heart had finally been touched after all this time, no matter the potential for tragedy. She'd thought I would always be alone…

She'll have to love you back, she thought suddenly, catching me by surprise with the direction of her thoughts. *If she's a bright girl.* She smiled. *But I can't imagine anyone being so slow they wouldn't see the catch* you *are.*

"Stop it, Mom, you're making me blush," I teased. Her words, though improbable, did cheer me.

Alice laughed and picked out the top hand of "Heart and Soul." I grinned and completed the simple harmony with her. Then I favored her with a performance of "Chopsticks."

She giggled, then sighed. "So I wish you'd tell me what you were laughing at Rose about," Alice said. "But I can see that you won't."

"Nope."

She flicked my ear with her finger.

"Be nice, Alice," Esme chided. "Edward is being a gentleman."

"But I want to *know*."

I laughed at the whining tone she put on. Then I said, "Here, Esme," and began playing her favorite song, an unnamed tribute to the love I'd watched between her and Carlisle for so many years.

"Thank you, dear." She squeezed my shoulder again.

I didn't have to concentrate to play the familiar piece. Instead I thought of Rosalie, still figuratively writhing in mortification in the garage, and I grinned to myself.

Having just discovered the potency of jealousy for myself, I had a small amount of pity for her. It was a wretched way to feel. Of course, her jealously was a thousand times more petty than mine. Quite the fox in the manger scenario.

I wondered how Rosalie's life and personality would have been different if she had not always been the most beautiful. Would she have been a happier person if beauty hadn't at all times been her strongest selling point? Less egocentric? More compassionate? Well, I supposed it was useless to wonder, because the past was done, and she always *had* been the most beautiful. Even when human, she had ever lived in the spotlight of her own loveliness. Not that she'd minded. The opposite—she'd loved

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admiration above almost anything else. That hadn't changed with the loss of her mortality.

It was no surprise then, taking this need as a given, that she'd been offended when I had not, from the beginning, worshiped her beauty the way she expected all males to worship. Not that she'd wanted *me* in any way—far from it. But it had aggravated her that I did not want her, despite that. She was used to being wanted.

It was different with Jasper and Carlisle—they were already both in love. I was completely unattached, and yet still remained obstinately unmoved.

I'd thought that old resentment was buried. That she was long passed it.

And she had been…until the day that I finally found someone whose beauty touched me the way hers had not.

Rosalie had relied on the belief that if I did not find *her* beauty worth worshiping, then certainly there was no beauty on earth that would reach me. She'd been furious since the moment I'd saved Bella's life, guessing, with her shrewd female intuition, the interest that I was all but unconscious of myself.

Rosalie was mortally offended that I found some insignificant human girl more appealing than her.

I suppressed the urge to laugh again.

It bothered me some, though, the way she saw Bella. Rosalie actually thought the girl was *plain*. How could she believe that? It seemed incomprehensible to me. A product of the jealousy, no doubt.

"Oh!" Alice said abruptly. "Jasper, guess what?"

I saw what she'd just seen, and my hands froze on the keys.

"What, Alice?" Jasper asked.

"Peter and Charlotte are coming to visit next week! They're going to be in the neighborhood, isn't that nice?"

"What's wrong, Edward?" Esme asked, feeling the tension in my shoulders.

"Peter and Charlotte are coming to *Forks*?" I hissed at Alice

She rolled her eyes at me. "Calm down, Edward. It's not their first visit."

My teeth clenched together. It *was* their first visit since Bella had arrived, and her sweet blood didn't appeal just to me.

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Alice frowned at my expression. "They never hunt here. You know that."

But Jasper's brother of sorts and the little vampire he loved were not like us; they hunted the usual way. They could not be trusted around Bella.

"When?" I demanded.

She pursed her lips unhappily, but told me what I needed to know. *Monday morning. No one is going to hurt Bella.*

"No," I agreed, and then turned away from her. "You ready, Emmett?"

"I thought we were leaving in the morning?"

"We're coming back by midnight Sunday. I guess it's up to you when you want to leave."

"Okay, fine. Let me say goodbye to Rose first."

"Sure." With the mood Rosalie was in, it would be a short goodbye.

You really have lost it, Edward, he thought as he headed toward the back door.

"I suppose I have."

"Play the new song for me, one more time," Esme asked.

"If you'd like that," I agreed, though I was a little hesitant to follow the tune to its unavoidable end—the end that had set me aching in unfamiliar ways. I thought for a moment, and then pulled the bottle cap from my pocket and set it on the empty music stand. That helped a bit—my little memento of her *yes*.

I nodded to myself, and started playing.

Esme and Alice exchanged a glance, but neither one asked.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to play with your food?" I called to Emmett.

"Oh, hey Edward!" he shouted back, grinning and waving at me. The bear took advantage of his distraction to rake its heavy paw across Emmett's chest. The sharp claws shredded through his shirt, and squealed across his skin.

The bear bellowed at the high-pitched noise.

Aw hell, Rose gave me this shirt!

Emmett roared back at the enraged animal.

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I sighed and sat down on a convenient boulder. This might take awhile.

But Emmett was almost done. He let the bear try to take his head off with another swipe of the paw, laughing as the blow bounced off and sent the bear staggering back. The bear roared and Emmett roared again through his laughter. Then he launched himself at the animal, who stood a head taller than him on its hind legs, and their bodies fell to the ground tangled up together, taking a mature spruce tree down with them. The bear's growls cut off with a gurgle.

A few minutes later, Emmett jogged over to where I was waiting for him. His shirt was destroyed, torn and bloodied, sticky with sap and covered in fur. His dark curly hair wasn't in much better shape. He had a huge grin on his face.

"That was a strong one. I could almost feel it when he clawed me."

"You're such a child, Emmett."

He eyed my smooth, clean white button-down. "Weren't you able to track down that mountain lion, then?"

"Of course I was. I just don't eat like a savage."

Emmett laughed his booming laugh. "I wish they were stronger. It would be more fun."

"No one said you had to fight your food."

"Yeah, but who else am I going to fight with? You and Alice cheat, Rose never wants to get her hair messed up, and Esme gets mad if Jasper and I *really* go at it."

"Life is hard all around, isn't it?"

Emmett grinned at me, shifting his weight a bit so that he was suddenly poised to take a charge.

"C'mon Edward. Just turn it off for one minute and fight fair."

"It doesn't turn off," I reminded him.

"Wonder what that human girl does to keep you out?" Emmett mused. "Maybe she could give me some pointers."

My good humor vanished. "Stay away from her," I growled through my teeth.

"Touchy, touchy."

I sighed. Emmett came to sit beside me on the rock.

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"Sorry. I know you're going through a tough spot. I really am trying to not be *too* much of an insensitive jerk, but, since that's sort of my natural state…"

He waited for me to laugh at his joke, and then made a face.

So serious all the time. What's bugging you now?

"Thinking about her. Well, worrying, really."

"What's there to worry about? *You* are *here.*" He laughed loudly.

I ignored his joke again, but answered his question. "Have you ever thought about how fragile they all are? How many bad things there are that can happen to a mortal?"

"Not really. I guess I see what you mean, though. I wasn't much match for a bear that first time around, was I?"

"Bears," I muttered, adding a new fear to the pile. "That would be just her luck, wouldn't it? Stray bear in town. Of course it would head straight for Bella."

Emmett chuckled. "You sound like a crazy person, do you know that?"

"Just imagine for one minute that Rosalie was human, Emmett. And she could run into a bear…or get hit by a car…or *lightening*…or fall down stairs…or get sick—get a *disease*!" The words burst from me stormily. It was a relief to let them out—they'd been festering inside me all weekend. "Fires and earthquakes and tornados! Ugh! When's the last time you watched the news? Have you *seen* the kinds of things that happen to them? Burglaries and homicides…" My teeth clenched together, and I was abruptly so infuriated by the idea of another *human* hurting her that I couldn't breathe.

"Whoa, whoa! Hold up, there, kid. She lives in Forks, remember? So she gets rained on." He shrugged.

"I think she has some serious bad luck, Emmett, I really do. Look at the evidence. Of all the places in the world she could go, she ends up in a town where *vampires* make up a significant portion of the population."

"Yeah, but we're vegetarians. So isn't that good luck, not bad?"

"With the way she smells? Definitely bad. And then, more bad luck, the way she smells to *me*." I glowered at my hands, hating them again.

"Except that you have more self-control than just about anyone but Carlisle. Good luck again."

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"The van?"

"That was just an accident."

"You should have seen it coming for her, Em, again and again. I swear, it was like she had some kind of magnetic pull."

"But you were there. That was good luck."

"Was it? Isn't this the worst luck any human could ever possibly have—to have a *vampire* fall in *love* with them?"

Emmett considered that quietly for a moment. He pictured the girl in his head, and found the image uninteresting. *Honestly, I can't really see the draw.*

"Well, I can't really see Rosalie's allure, either," I said rudely. "*Honestly*, she seems like more work than any pretty face is worth."

Emmett chuckled. "I don't suppose you'd tell me…"

"I don't know what her problem is, Emmett," I lied with a sudden, wide grin.

I saw his intent in time to brace myself. He tried to shove me off the rock, and there was a loud cracking sound as a fissure opened in the stone between us.

"Cheater," he muttered.

I waited for him to try another time, but his thoughts took a different direction. He was picturing Bella's face again, but imagining it whiter, imagining her eyes bright red…

"No," I said, my voice strangled.

"It solves your worries about mortality, doesn't it? And then you wouldn't want to kill her, either. Isn't that the best way?"

"For me? Or for her?"

"For you," he answered easily. His tone added the *of course.*

I laughed humorlessly. "Wrong answer."

"I didn't mind so much," he reminded me.

"Rosalie did."

He sighed. We both knew that Rosalie would do anything, give up anything, if it meant she could be human again. Even Emmett.

"Yeah, Rose did," he acquiesced quietly.

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"I can't… I shouldn't… I'm *not* going to ruin Bella's life. Wouldn't you feel the same, if it were Rosalie?"

Emmett thought about that for a moment. *You really…love her?*

"I can't even describe it, Emmett. All of a sudden, this girl's the whole world to me. I don't see the *point* of the rest of the world without her anymore."

But you won't change her? She won't last forever, Edward.

"I know that," I groaned.

And, as you've pointed out, she's sort of breakable.

"Trust me—that I know, too."

Emmett was not a tactful person, and delicate discussions were not his forte. He struggled now, wanting very much not to be offensive.

Can you even touch her? I mean, if you love *her…wouldn't you want to, well* touch *her…?*

Emmett and Rosalie shared an intensely physical love. He had a hard time understanding how one *could* love, without that aspect.

I sighed. "I can't even think of that, Emmett."

Wow. So what are your options, then?

"I don't know," I whispered. "I'm trying to figure out a way to…to leave her. I just can't fathom how to make myself stay away…"

With a deep sense of gratification, I suddenly realized that it was *right* for me to stay—at least for now, with Peter and Charlotte on their way. She was safer with me here, temporarily, than she would be if I were gone. For the moment, I could be her unlikely protector.

The thought made me anxious; I itched to be back so that I could fill that role for as long as possible.

Emmett noticed the change in my expression. *What are you thinking about?*

"Right now," I admitted a bit sheepishly, "I'm dying to run back to Forks and check on her. I don't know if I'll make it till Sunday night."

"Uh-uh! You are *not* going home early. Let Rosalie cool down a little bit. Please! For my sake."

"I'll try to stay," I said doubtfully.

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Emmett tapped the phone in my pocket. "Alice would call if there were any basis for your panic attack. She's as weird about this girl as you are."

I grimaced at that. "Fine. But I'm not staying past Sunday."

"There's no point in hurrying back—it's going to be sunny, anyway. Alice said we were free from school until Wednesday."

I shook my head rigidly.

"Peter and Charlotte know how to behave themselves."

"I really don't care, Emmett. With Bella's luck, she'll go wandering off into the woods at exactly the wrong moment and—" I flinched. "Peter isn't known for his self-control. I'm going back Sunday."

Emmett sighed. *Exactly like a crazy person.*

Bella was sleeping peacefully when I climbed up to her bedroom window early Monday morning. I'd remembered oil this time, and the window now moved silently out of my way.

I could tell by the way her hair lay smooth across the pillow that she'd had a less restless night than the last time I was here. She had her hands folded under her cheek like a small child, and her mouth was slightly open. I could hear her breath moving slowly in and out between her lips.

It was an amazing relief to be here, to be able to see her again. I realized that I wasn't truly at ease unless that was the case. Nothing was right when I was away from her.

Not that all was right when I was with her, either, though. I sighed, letting the thirst fire rake through my throat. I'd been away from it too long. The time spent without pain and temptation made it all the more forceful now. It was bad enough that I was afraid to go kneel beside her bed so that I could read the titles of her books. I wanted to know the stories in her head, but I was afraid of more than my thirst, afraid that if I let myself get that close to her, I would want to be closer still…

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Her lips looked very soft and warm. I could imagine touching them with the tip of my finger. Just lightly…

That was exactly the kind of mistake that I had to avoid.

My eyes ran over her face again and again, examining it for changes. Mortals changed all the time—I was sad at the thought of missing anything…

I thought she looked…tired. Like she hadn't gotten enough sleep this weekend. Had she gone out?

I laughed silently and wryly at how much that upset me. So what if she had? I didn't own her. She wasn't mine.

No, she wasn't mine—and I was sad again.

One of her hands twitched, and I noticed that there were shallow, barely healed scrapes across the heel of her palm. She'd been hurt? Even though it was obviously not a serious injury, it still disturbed me. I considered the location, and decided she must have tripped. That seemed a reasonable explanation, all things considered.

It was comforting to think that I wouldn't have to puzzle over either of these small mysteries forever. We were *friends* now—or, at least, trying to be friends. I could ask her about her weekend—about the beach, and whatever late night activity had made her look so weary. I could ask what had happened to her hands. And I could laugh a little when she confirmed my theory about them.

I smiled gently as I wondered whether or not she *had* fallen in the ocean. I wondered if she'd had a pleasant time on the outing. I wondered if she'd thought about me at all. If she'd missed me even the tiniest portion of the amount that I'd missed her.

I tried to picture her in the sun on the beach. The picture was incomplete, though, because I'd never been to First Beach myself. I only knew how it looked in pictures…

I felt a tiny qualm of unease as I thought about the reason why I'd never once been to the pretty beach located just a few minutes run from my home. Bella had spent the day at La Push—a place where I was forbidden, by treaty, to go. A place where a few old men still remembered the stories about the Cullens, remembered and believed them. A place where our secret was known…

I shook my head. I had nothing to worry about there. The Quileutes were bound by treaty, too. Even had Bella run into one of those aging sages, they could reveal

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nothing. And why would the subject ever be broached? Why would Bella think to voice her curiosity there? No—the Quileutes were perhaps the *one* thing I did not have to worry about.

I was angry with the sun when it began to rise. It reminded me that I could not satisfy my curiosity for days to come. Why did it choose to shine now?

With a sigh, I ducked out her window before it was light enough for anyone to see me here. I meant to stay in the thick forest by her house and see her off to school, but when I got into the trees, I was surprised to find the trace of her scent lingering on the trail there.

I followed it quickly, curiously, becoming more and more worried as it led deeper into the darkness. What had Bella been doing out *here*?

The trail stopped abruptly, in the middle of nowhere in particular. She'd gone just a few steps off the trail, into the ferns, where she'd touched the trunk of a fallen tree. Perhaps sat there…

I sat where she had, and looked around. All she would have been able to see was ferns and forest. It had probably been raining—the scent was washed out, having never set deeply into the tree.

Why would Bella have come to sit here alone—and she had been alone, no doubt about that—in the middle of the wet, murky forest?

It made no sense, and, unlike those other points of curiosity, I could hardly bring this up in casual conversation.

So, Bella, I was following your scent through the woods after I left your room where I'd been watching you sleep… Yes, that would be quite the ice breaker.

I would never know what she'd been thinking and doing here, and that had my teeth grinding together in frustration. Worse, this was far too much like the scenario I'd imagined for Emmett—Bella wandering alone in the woods, where her scent would call to anyone who had the senses to track it…

I groaned. Not only did she have bad luck, but she courted it.

Well, for this moment she had a protector. I would watch over her, keep her from harm, for as long as I could justify it.

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I suddenly found myself wishing that Peter and Charlotte would make an extended stay.

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8. Ghost

I did not see much of Jasper's guests for the two sunny days that they were in Forks. I only went home at all so that Esme wouldn't worry. Otherwise, my existence seemed more like that of a specter than a vampire. I hovered, invisible in the shadows, where I could follow the object of my love and obsession—where I could see her and hear her in the minds of the lucky humans who could walk through the sunlight beside her, sometimes accidentally brushing the back of her hand with their own. She never reacted to such contact; their hands were just as warm as hers.

The enforced absence from school had never been a trial like this before. But the sun seemed to make her happy, so I could not resent it too much. Anything that pleased her was in my good graces.

Monday morning, I eavesdropped on a conversation that had the potential to destroy my confidence and make the time spent away from her a torture. As it ended up, though, it rather made my day.

I had to feel some little respect for Mike Newton; he had not simply given up and slunk away to nurse his wounds. He had more bravery than I'd given him credit for. He was going to try again.

Bella got to school quite early and, seeming intent on enjoying the sun while it lasted, sat at one of the seldom used picnic benches while she waited for the first bell to ring. Her hair caught the sun in unexpected ways, giving off a reddish shine that I had not anticipated.

Mike found her there, doodling again, and was thrilled at his good luck.

It was agonizing to only be able to watch, powerless, bound to the forest's shadows by the bright sunlight.

She greeted him with enough enthusiasm to make him ecstatic, and me the opposite.

See, she likes me. She wouldn't smile like that if she didn't. I bet she wanted to go to the dance with me. Wonder what's so important in Seattle…

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He perceived the change in her hair. "I never noticed before—your hair has red in it."

I accidentally uprooted the young spruce tree my hand was resting on when he pinched a strand of her hair between his fingers.

"Only in the sun," she said. To my deep satisfaction, she cringed away from him slightly when he tucked the strand behind her ear.

It took Mike a minute to build up his courage, wasting some time on small talk.

She reminded him of the essay we all had due on Wednesday. From the faintly smug expression on her face, hers was already done. He'd forgotten altogether, and that severely diminished his free time.

Dang—stupid essay.

Finally he got to the point—my teeth were clenched so hard they could have pulverized granite—and even then, he couldn't make himself ask the question outright.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go out."

"Oh," she said.

There was a brief silence.

Oh? What does that mean? Is she going to yes? Wait—I guess I didn't really ask.

He swallowed hard.

"Well, we could go to dinner or something…and I could work on it later."

Stupid—that wasn't a question either.

"Mike…"

The agony and fury of my jealousy was every whit as powerful as it had been last week. I broke another tree trying to hold myself here. I wanted so badly to race across the campus, too fast for human eyes, and snatch her up—to steal her away from the boy that I hated so much in this moment I could have kill him and enjoyed it.

Would she say yes to him?

"I don't think that would be the best idea."

I breathed again. My rigid body relaxed.

Seattle was just an excuse, after all. Shouldn't have asked. What was I thinking? Bet it's that freak, Cullen…

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"Why?" he asked sullenly.

"I think…" she hesitated. "And if you ever repeat what I'm saying right now I will cheerfully beat you to death—"

I laughed out loud at the sound of a death threat coming through her lips. A jay shrieked, startled, and launched itself away from me.

"But I think that would hurt Jessica's feelings."

"Jessica?" *What? But… Oh. Okay. I guess… So… Huh.*

His thoughts were no longer coherent.

"Really, Mike, are you *blind*?"

I echoed her sentiment. She shouldn't expect everyone to be as perceptive as she was, but really this instance was beyond obvious. With as much trouble as Mike had had working himself up to ask Bella out, did he imagine it wasn't just as difficult for Jessica? It must be selfishness that made him blind to others. And Bella was so unselfish, she saw everything.

Jessica. Huh. Wow. Huh. "Oh," he managed to say.

Bella used his confusion to make her exit.

"It's time for class, and I can't be late again."

Mike became an unreliable viewpoint from then on. He found, as he turned the idea of Jessica around and around in his head, that he rather liked the thought of her finding him attractive. It was second place, not as good as if Bella had felt that way.

She's cute, though, I guess. Decent body. A bird in the hand…

He was off then, on to new fantasies that were just as vulgar as the ones about Bella, but now they only irritated rather than infuriated. How little he deserved either girl; they were almost interchangeable to him. I stayed clear of his head after that.

When she was out of sight, I curled up against the cool trunk of an enormous madrone tree and I danced from mind to mind, keeping her in sight, always glad when Angela Weber was available to look through. I wished there was someway to thank the Weber girl for simply being a nice person. It made me feel better to think that Bella had one friend worth having.

I watched Bella's face from whichever angle I was given, and I could see that she was sad again. This surprised me—I thought the sun would be enough to keep her

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smiling. At lunch, I saw her glance time and time again toward the empty Cullen table, and that thrilled me. It gave me hope. Perhaps she missed me, too.

She had plans to go out with the other girls—I automatically planned my own surveillance—but these plans were postponed when Mike invited Jessica out on the date he'd planned for Bella.

So I went straight to her home instead, doing a quick sweep of the woods to make sure no one dangerous had wandered too close. I knew Jasper had warned his one-time brother to avoid the town—citing my insanity as both explanation and warning—but I wasn't taking any chances. Peter and Charlotte had no intention of causing animosity with my family, but intentions were changeable things…

All right, I was overdoing it. I knew that.

As if she knew I was watching, as if she took pity on the agony I felt when I couldn't see her, Bella came out to the backyard after a long hour indoors. She had a book in her hand and a blanket under her arm.

Silently, I climbed into the higher branches of the closest tree overlooking the yard.

She spread the blanket on the damp grass and then lay on her stomach and started flipping through the worn book, as if trying to find her place. I read over her shoulder.

Ah—more classics. She was an Austen fan.

She read quickly, crossing and recrossing her ankles in the air. I was watching the sunlight and wind play in her hair when her body suddenly stiffened, and her hand froze on the page. All I saw was that she'd reached chapter three when she roughly grabbed a thick section of pages and shoved them over.

I caught a glance of a title page, *Mansfield Park.* She was starting a new story—the book was a compilation of novels. I wondered why she'd switched stories so abruptly.

Just a few moments later, she slammed the book angrily shut. With a fierce scowl on her face, she pushed the book aside and flipped over onto her back. She took a deep breath, as if to calm herself, pushed her sleeves up and closed her eyes. I remembered the novel, but I couldn't think of anything offensive in it to upset her. Another mystery. I sighed.

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She lay very still, moving just once to yank her hair away from her face. It fanned out over her head, a river of chestnut. And then she was motionless again.

Her breathing slowed. After several long minutes her lips began to tremble. Mumbling in her sleep.

Impossible to resist. I listened as far out as I could, catching voices in the houses nearby.

Two tablespoons of flour…one cup of milk…

C'mon! Get it through the hoop! Aw, c'mon!

Red, or blue…or maybe I should wear something more casual…

There was no one close by. I jumped to the ground, landing silently on my toes.

This was very wrong, very risky. How condescendingly I'd once judged Emmett for his thoughtless ways and Jasper for his lack of discipline—and now I was consciously flouting all the rules with a wild abandon that made their lapses look like nothing at all. I used to be the responsible one.

I sighed, but crept out into the sunshine, regardless.

I avoided looking at myself in the sun's glare. It was bad enough that my skin was stone and inhuman in shadow; I didn't want to look at Bella and myself side by side in the sunlight. The difference between us was already insurmountable, painful enough without this image also in my head.

But I couldn't ignore the rainbow sparkles that reflected onto her skin when I got closer. My jaw locked at the sight. Could I be any more of a freak? I imagined her terror if she opened her eyes now…

I started to retreat, but she mumbled again, holding me there.

"Mmm… Mmm."

Nothing intelligible. Well, I would wait for a bit.

I carefully stole her book, stretching my arm out and holding my breath while I was close, just in case. I started breathing again when I was a few yards away, tasting the way the sunshine and open air affected her scent. The heat seemed to sweeten the smell. My throat flamed with desire, the fire fresh and fierce again because I had been away from her for too long.

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I spent a moment controlling that, and then—forcing myself to breathe through my nose—I let her book fall open in my hands. She'd started with the first book… I flipped through the pages quickly to the third chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, searching for something potentially offensive in Austen's overly polite prose.

When my eyes stopped automatically at my name—the character Edward Ferrars being introduced for the first time—Bella spoke again.

"Mmm. Edward." She sighed.

This time I did not fear that she had awoken. Her voice was just a low, wistful murmur. Not the scream of fear it would have been if she'd seen me now.

Joy warred with self-loathing. She was still dreaming of me, at least.

"Edmund. Ahh. Too….close…"

Edmund?

Ha! She wasn't dreaming of me at all, I realized blackly. The self-loathing returned in force. She was dreaming of fictional characters. So much for my conceit.

I replaced her book, and stole back into the cover of the shadows—where I belonged.

The afternoon passed and I watched, feeling helpless again, as the sun slowly sank in the sky and the shadows crawled across the lawn toward her. I wanted to push them back, but the darkness was inevitable; the shadows took her. When the light was gone, her skin looked too pale—ghostly. Her hair was dark again, almost black against her face.

It was a frightening thing to watch—like witnessing Alice's visions come to fruition. Bella's steady, strong heartbeat was the only reassurance, the sound that kept this moment from feeling like a nightmare.

I was relieved when her father arrived home.

I could hear little from him as he drove down the street toward the house. Some vague annoyance…in the past, something from his day at work. Expectation mixed with hunger—I guessed that he was looking forward to dinner. But his thoughts were so quiet and contained that I could not be sure I was right; I only got the gist of them.

I wondered what her mother sounded like—what the genetic combination had been that had formed her so uniquely.

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Bella started awake, jerking up to a sitting position when the tires of her father's car hit the brick driveway. She stared around herself, seeming confused by the unexpected darkness. For one brief moment, her eyes touched the shadows where I hid, but they flickered quickly away.

"Charlie?" she asked in a low voice, still peering into the trees surrounding the small yard.

The door of his car slammed shut, and she looked to the sound. She got to her feet quickly and gathered her things, casting one more look back toward the woods.

I moved into a tree closer to the back window near the small kitchen, and listened to their evening. It was interesting to compare Charlie's words to his muffled thoughts. His love and concern for his only daughter were nearly overwhelming, and yet his words were always terse and casual. Most of the time, they sat in companionable silence.

I heard her discuss her plans for the following evening in Port Angeles, and I refined my own plans as I listened. Jasper had not warned Peter and Charlotte to stay clear of Port Angeles. Though I knew that they had fed recently and had no intention of hunting any where in the vicinity of our home, I would watch her, just in case. After all, there were always others of my kind out there. And then, all those human dangers that I had never much considered before now.

I heard her worry aloud about leaving her father to prepare dinner alone, and smiled at this proof to my theory—yes, she was a care-taker.

And then I left, knowing I would return when she was asleep.

I would not trespass on her privacy the way the peeping tom would have. I was here for her protection, not to leer at her in the way Mike Newton no doubt would, were he agile enough to move through the treetops the way I could. I would not treat her so crassly.

My house was empty when I returned, which was fine by me. I didn't miss the confused or disparaging thoughts, questioning my sanity. Emmett had left a note stuck to the newel post.

Football at the Rainier field—c'mon! Please?

I found a pen and scrawled the word *sorry* beneath his plea. The teams were even without me, in any case.

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I went for the shortest of hunting trips, contenting myself with the smaller, gentler creatures that did not taste as good as the hunters, and then changed into fresh clothes before I ran back to Forks.

Bella did not sleep as well tonight. She thrashed in her blankets, her face sometimes worried, sometimes sad. I wondered what nightmare haunted her…and then realized that perhaps I really didn't want to know.

When she spoke, she mostly muttered derogatory things about Forks in a glum voice. Only once, when she sighed out the words "Come back" and her hand twitched open—a wordless plea—did I have a chance to hope she might be dreaming of me.

The next day of school, the *last* day the sun would hold me prisoner, was much the same as the day before. Bella seemed even gloomier than yesterday, and I wondered if she would bow out of her plans—she didn't seem in the mood.

But, being Bella, she would probably put her friends' enjoyment above that of her own.

She wore a deep blue blouse today, and the color set her skin off perfectly, making it look like fresh cream.

School ended, and Jessica agreed to pick the other girls up—Angela was going, too, for which I was grateful.

I went home to get my car. When I found that Peter and Charlotte were there, I decided could afford to give the girls an hour or so for a head start. I would never be able to bear following behind them, driving at the speed limit—hideous thought.

I came in through the kitchen, nodding vaguely at Emmett's and Esme's greetings as I passed by everyone in the front room and went straight to the piano.

Ugh, he's back. Rosalie, of course.

Ah, Edward. I hate to see him suffering so. Esme's joy was becoming marred by concern. She *should* be concerned. This love story she envisioned for me was careening toward a tragedy more perceptibly every moment.

Have fun in Port Angeles tonight, Alice thought cheerfully. *Let me know when I'm allowed to talk to Bella.*

You're pathetic. I can't believe you missed the game last night just to watch somebody sleep, Emmett grumbled.

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Jasper paid me no mind, even when the song I played came out a little more stormily than I'd intended. It was an old song, with a familiar theme: impatience. Jasper was saying goodbye to his friends, who eyed me curiously.

What a strange creature, the Alice-sized, white-blond Charlotte was thinking. *And he was so normal and pleasant the last time we met.*

Peter's thoughts were in sync with hers, as was usually the case.

It must be the animals. The lack of human blood drives them mad eventually, he was concluding. His hair was just as fair as hers, and almost as long. They were very similar—except for size, as he was almost as tall as Jasper—in both look and thought. A well matched pair, I'd always thought.

Everyone but Esme stopped thinking about me after a moment, and I played in more subdued tones so that I would not attract notice.

I did not pay attention to them for a long while, just letting the music distract me from my unease. It was hard to have the girl out of sight and mind. I only returned my attention to their conversation when the goodbyes grew more final.

"If you see Maria again," Jasper was saying, a little warily, "tell her I wish her well."

Maria was the vampire who had created both Jasper and Peter—Jasper in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Peter more recently, in the nineteen forties. She'd looked Jasper up once when we were in Calgary. It had been an eventful visit—we'd had to move immediately. Jasper had politely asked her to keep her distance in the future.

"I don't imagine that will happen soon," Peter said with a laugh—Maria was undeniable dangerous and there was not much love lost between her and Peter. Peter had, after all, been instrumental in Jasper's defection. Jasper had always been Maria's favorite; she considered it a minor detail that she had once planned to kill him. "But, should it happen, I certainly will."

They were shaking hands then, preparing to depart. I let the song I was playing trail off to an unsatisfying end, and got hastily to my feet.

"Charlotte, Peter," I said, nodding.

"It was nice to see you again, Edward," Charlotte said doubtfully. Peter just nodded in return.

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Madman, Emmett threw after me.

Idiot, Rosalie thought at the same time.

Poor boy. Esme.

And Alice, in a chiding tone. *They're going straight east, to Seattle. No where near Port Angeles.* She showed me the proof in her visions.

I pretended I hadn't heard that. My excuses were already flimsy enough.

Once in my car, I felt more relaxed; the robust purr of the engine Rosalie had boosted for me—last year, when she was in a better mood—was soothing. It was a relief to be in motion, to know that I was getting closer to Bella with every mile that flew away under my tires.

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9. Port Angeles

It was too bright for me to drive into town when I got to Port Angeles; the sun was still too high overhead, and, though my windows were tinted dark, there was no reason to take unnecessary risks. *More* unnecessary risks, I should say.

I was certain I would be able to find Jessica's thoughts from a distance—Jessica's thoughts were louder than Angela's, but once I found the first, I'd be able to hear the second. Then, when the shadows lengthened, I could get closer. For now, I pulled off the road onto an overgrown driveway just outside the town that appeared to be infrequently used.

I knew the general direction to search in—there was really only one place for dress shopping in Port Angeles. It wasn't long before I found Jessica, spinning in front of a three way mirror, and I could see Bella in her peripheral vision, appraising the long black dress she wore.

Bella still looks pissed. Ha ha. Angela was right—Tyler was full of it. I can't believe she's so upset about it, though. At least she knows she has a back up date for the prom. What if Mike doesn't have fun at the dance, and he doesn't ask me out again? What if he asks Bella to the prom? Would she have asked Mike to the dance if I hadn't said anything? Does he think she's prettier than me? Does she *think she's prettier than me?*

"I think I like the blue one better. It really brings out your eyes."

Jessica smiled at Bella with false warmth, while eyeing her suspiciously.

Does she really think that? Or does she want me to look like a cow on Saturday?

I was already tired of listening to Jessica. I searched close by for Angela—ah, but Angela was in the process of changing dresses, and I skipped quickly out of her head to give her some privacy.

Well, there wasn't much trouble Bella could get into in a department store. I'd let them shop and then catch up with them when they were done. It wouldn't be long until it was dark—the clouds were beginning to return, drifting in from the west. I could only catch glimpses of them through the thick trees, but I could see how they would hurry the

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sunset. I welcomed them, craved them more than I had ever yearned for their shadows before. Tomorrow I could sit beside Bella in school again, monopolize her attention at lunch again. I could ask her all the questions I'd been saving up…

So, she was furious about Tyler's presumption. I'd seen that in his head—that he'd meant it literally when he'd spoken of the prom, that he was staking a claim. I pictured her expression from that other afternoon—the outraged disbelief—and I laughed. I wondered what she would say to him about this. I wouldn't want to miss her reaction.

The time went slowly while I waited for the shadows to lengthen. I checked in periodically with Jessica; her mental voice was the easiest to find, but I didn't like to linger there long. I saw the place they were planning to eat. It would be dark by dinner time…maybe I would coincidentally choose the same restaurant. I touched the phone in my pocket, thinking of inviting Alice out to eat… She would love that, but she would also want to talk to Bella. I wasn't sure if I was ready to have Bella *more* involved with my world. Wasn't one vampire trouble enough?

I checked in routinely with Jessica again. She was thinking about her jewelry, asking Angela's opinion.

"Maybe I should take the necklace back. I've got one at home that would probably work, and I spent more than I was supposed to…" My mom is going to freak out. What was I thinking?

"I don't mind going back to the store. Do you think Bella will be looking for us, though?"

What was this? Bella wasn't with them? I stared through Jessica's eyes first, then switched to Angela's. They were on the sidewalk in front of a line of shops, just turning back the other way. Bella was no where in sight.

Oh, who cares about Bella? Jess thought impatiently, before answering Angela's question. *"She's fine. We'll get to the restaurant in plenty of time, even if we go back. Anyway, I think she wanted to be alone."* I got a brief glimpse of the bookshop Jessica thought Bella had gone to.

"Let's hurry, then," Angela said. *I hope Bella doesn't think we ditched her. She was so nice to me in the car before… She's really a sweet person. But she's seemed kind*

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of blue all day. I wonder if it's because of Edward Cullen? I'll bet that was why she was asking about his family…

I should have been paying better attention. What all had I missed here? Bella was off wandering by herself, and she'd been asking about me before? Angela was paying attention to Jessica now—Jessica was babbling about that idiot Mike—and I could get nothing more from her.

I judged the shadows. The sun would be behind the clouds soon enough. If I stayed on the west side of the road, where the buildings would shade the street from the fading light…

I started to feel anxious as I drove through the sparse traffic into the center of the town. This wasn't something I had considered—Bella taking off on her own—and I had no idea how to find her. I *should* have considered it.

I knew Port Angeles well; I drove straight to the bookstore in Jessica's head, hoping my search would be short, but doubting it would be so easy. When did Bella ever make it easy?

Sure enough, the little shop was empty except for the anachronistically dressed woman behind the counter. This didn't look like the kind of place Bella would be interested in—too new age for a practical person. I wondered if she'd even bothered to go in?

There was a patch of shade I could park in… It made a dark pathway right up to the overhang of the shop. I really shouldn't. Wandering around in the sunlight hours was not safe. What if a passing car threw the sun's reflection into the shade at just the wrong moment?

But I didn't know how else to look for Bella!

I parked and got out, keeping to the deepest side of the shadow. I strode quickly into the store, noting the faint trace of Bella's scent in the air. She had been here, on the sidewalk, but there was no hint of her fragrance inside the shop.

"Welcome! Can I help—" the saleswoman began to say, but I was already out the door.

I followed Bella's scent as far as the shade would allow, stopping when I got to the edge of the sunlight.

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How powerless it made me feel—fenced in by the line between dark and light that stretched across the sidewalk in front of me. So limited.

I could only guess that she'd continued across the street, heading south. There wasn't really much in that direction. Was she lost? Well, that possibility didn't sound entirely out of character.

I got back in the car and drove slowly through the streets, looking for her. I stepped out into a few other patches of shadow, but I only caught her scent once more, and the direction of it confused me. Where was she trying to go?

I drove back and forth between the bookstore and the restaurant a few times, hoping to see her on her way. Jessica and Angela were already there, trying to decide whether to order, or to wait for Bella. Jessica was pushing for ordering immediately.

I began flitting through the minds of strangers, looking through their eyes. Surely, someone must have seen her somewhere.

I got more and more anxious the longer she remained missing. I hadn't considered before how difficult she might prove to find once, like now, she was out of my sight and off her normal paths. I didn't like it.

The clouds were massing on the horizon, and, in a few more minutes, I would be free to track her on foot. It wouldn't take me long then. It was only the sun that made me so helpless now. Just few more minutes, and then the advantage would be mine again and it would be the human world that was powerless.

Another mind, and another. So many trivial thoughts.

…think the baby has another ear infection…

Was it six-four-oh or six-oh-four…?

Late again. I ought to tell him…

Here she comes! Aha!

There, at last, was her face. Finally, someone had noticed her!

The relief lasted for only a fraction of a second, and then I read more fully the thoughts of the man who was gloating over her face in the shadows.

His mind was a stranger to me, and yet, not totally unfamiliar. I had once hunted exactly such minds.

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"NO!" I roared, and a volley of snarls erupted from my throat. My foot shoved the gas pedal to the floor, but where was I going?

I knew the general location of his thoughts, but the knowledge was not specific enough. Something, there had to be something—a street sign, a store front, something in his sight that would give away his location. But Bella was deep in shadow, and his eyes were focused only on her frightened expression—enjoying the fear there.

Her face was blurred in his mind by the memory of other faces. Bella was not his first victim.

The sound of my growls shook the frame of the car, but did not distract me.

There were no windows in the wall behind her. Somewhere industrial, away from the more populated shopping district. My car squealed around a corner, swerving past another vehicle, heading in what I hoped was the right direction. By the time the other driver honked, the sound was far behind me.

Look at her shaking! The man chuckled in anticipation. The fear was the draw for him—the part he enjoyed.

"Stay away from me." Her voice was low and steady, not a scream.

"Don't be like that, sugar."

He watched her flinch to a rowdy laugh that came from another direction. He was irritated with the noise—*Shut up, Jeff!* he thought—but he enjoyed the way she cringed. It excited him. He began to imagine her pleas, the way she would beg…

I hadn't realized that there were others with him until I'd heard the loud laughter. I scanned out from him, desperate for something that I could use. He was taking the first step in her direction, flexing his hands.

The minds around him were not the cesspool that his was. They were all slightly intoxicated, not one of them realizing how far the man they called Lonnie planned to go with this. They were following Lonnie's lead blindly. He'd promised them a little fun…

One of them glanced down the street, nervous—he didn't want to get caught harassing the girl—and gave me what I needed. I recognized the cross street he stared toward.

I flew under a red light, sliding through a space just wide enough between two cars in the moving traffic. Horns blared behind me.

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My phone vibrated in my pocket. I ignored it.

Lonnie moved slowly toward the girl, drawing out the suspense—the moment of terror that aroused him. He waited for her scream, preparing to savor it.

But Bella locked her jaw and braced herself. He was surprised—he'd expected her to try to run. Surprised and slightly disappointed. He liked to chase his prey down, the adrenaline of the hunt.

Brave, this one. Maybe better, I guess…more fight in her.

I was a block away. The monster could hear the roar of my engine now, but he paid it no attention, too intent on his victim.

I would see how he enjoyed the hunt when he was the prey. I would see what he thought of *my* style of hunting.

In another compartment of my head, I was already sorting through the range of tortures I'd born witness to in my vigilante days, searching for the most painful of them. He would suffer for this. He would writhe in agony. The others would merely die for their part, but the monster named *Lonnie* would beg for death long before I would give him that gift.

He was in the road, crossing toward her.

I spun sharply around the corner, my headlights washing across the scene and freezing the rest of them in place. I could have run down the leader, who leapt out of the way, but that was too easy a death for him.

I let the car spin out, swinging all the way around so that I was facing back the way I'd come and the passenger door was closest to Bella. I threw that open, and she was already running toward the car.

"Get in," I snarled.

What the hell?

Knew this was a bad idea! She's not alone.

Should I run?

Think I'm going to throw up…

Bella jumped through the open door without hesitating, pulling the door shut behind her.

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And then she looked up at me with the most trustful expression I had ever seen on a human face, and all my violent plans crumbled.

It took much, much less than a second for me to see that I could not leave her in the car in order to deal with the four men in the street. What would I tell her, not to watch? Ha! When did she ever do what I asked? When did she ever do the safe thing?

Would I drag them away, out of her sight, and leave her alone here? It was a long shot that another dangerous human would be prowling the streets of Port Angeles tonight, but it was a long shot that there was even the first! Like a magnet, she drew all things dangerous toward herself. I could not let her out of my sight.

It would feel like part of the same motion to her as I accelerated, taking her away from her pursuers so quickly that they gaped after my car with uncomprehending expressions. She would not recognize my instant of hesitation. She would assume the plan was escape from the beginning.

I couldn't even hit him with my car. That would frighten her.

I wanted his death so savagely that the need for it rang in my ears and clouded my sight and was a flavor on my tongue. My muscles were coiled with the urgency, the craving, the necessity of it. I *had* to kill him. I would peel him slowly apart, piece by piece, skin from muscle, muscle from bone…

Except that the girl—the only girl in the world—was clinging to her seat with both hands, staring at me, her eyes still wide and utterly trusting. Vengeance would have to wait.

"Put on your seatbelt," I ordered. My voice was rough with the hate and bloodlust. Not the usual bloodlust. I would not sully myself by taking any part of that man inside me.

She locked the seatbelt into place, jumping slightly at the sound it made. That little sound made her jump, yet she did not flinch as I tore through the town, ignoring all traffic guides. I could feel her eyes on me. She seemed oddly relaxed. It didn't make sense to me—not with what she'd just been through.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice rough with stress and fear.

She wanted to know if *I* was okay?

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I thought about her question for a fraction of a second. Not long enough for her to notice the hesitation. *Was* I okay?

"No," I realized, and my tone seethed with rage.

I took her to the same unused drive where I'd spent the afternoon engaged in the poorest surveillance ever kept. It was black now under the trees.

I was so furious that my body froze in place there, utterly motionless. My ice-locked hands ached to crush her attacker, to grind him into pieces so mangled that his body could never be identified….

But that would entail leaving her here alone, unprotected in the dark night.

"Bella?" I asked through my teeth.

"Yes?" she responded huskily. She cleared her throat.

"Are you all right?" That was really the most important thing, the first priority. Retribution was secondary. I *knew* that, but my body was so filled with rage that it was hard to think.

"Yes." Her voice was still thick—with fear, no doubt.

And so I could not leave her.

Even if she wasn't at constant risk for some infuriating reason—some joke the universe was playing on me—even if I could be *sure* that she would be perfectly safe in my absence, I could not leave her alone in the dark.

She must be so frightened.

Yet I was in no condition to comfort her—even if I knew exactly how that was to be accomplished, which I did not. Surely she could feel the brutality radiating out of me, surely that much was obvious. I would frighten her even more if I could not calm the lust for slaughter boiling inside me.

I needed to think about something else.

"Distract me, please," I pleaded.

"I'm sorry, what?"

I barely had enough control to try to explain what I needed.

"Just prattle about something unimportant until I calm down," I instructed, my jaw still locked. Only the fact that she needed me held me inside the car. I could hear the

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man's thoughts, his disappointment and anger… I knew where to find him… I closed my eyes, wishing that I couldn't see anyway…

"Um…" She hesitated—trying to make sense of my request, I imagined. "I'm going to run over Tyler Crowley tomorrow before school?" She said this like it was a question.

Yes—this was what I needed. Of course Bella would come up with something unexpected. Like it had been before, the threat of violence coming through her lips was hilarious—so comical it was jarring. If I had not been burning with the urge to kill, I would have laughed.

"Why?" I barked out, to force her to speak again.

"He's telling everyone that he's taking me to prom," she said, her voice filled with her tiger-kitten outrage. "Either he's insane or he's still trying to make up for almost killing me last…well you remember it," she inserted dryly, "and he thinks *prom* is somehow the correct way to do this. So I figure if I endanger his life, then we're even, and he can't keep trying to make amends. I don't need enemies and maybe Lauren would back off if he left me alone. I might have to total his Sentra, though," she went on, thoughtful now. "If he doesn't have a ride he can't take anyone to prom…"

It was encouraging to see that she sometimes got things wrong. Tyler's persistence had nothing to do with the accident. She didn't seem to understand the appeal she held for the human boys at the high school. Did she not see the appeal she had for me, either?

Ah, it was working. The baffling processes of her mind were always engrossing. I was beginning to gain control of myself, to see something beyond vengeance and torture…

"I heard about that," I told her. She had stopped talking, and I needed her to continue.

"*You* did?" she asked incredulously. And then her voice was angrier than before. "If he's paralyzed from the neck down, he can't go to the prom either."

I wished there was someway I could ask her to continue with the threats of death and bodily harm with out sounding insane. She couldn't have picked a better way to

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calm me. And her words—just sarcasm in her case, hyperbole—were a reminder I dearly needed in this moment.

I sighed, and opened my eyes.

"Better?" she asked timidly.

"Not really."

No, I was calmer, but not better. Because I'd just realized that I could not kill the monster named Lonnie, and I still wanted that more than almost anything else in the world. Almost.

The only thing in this moment that I wanted more than to commit a highly justifiable murder, was this girl. And, though I couldn't have her, just the dream of having her made it impossible for me to go on a killing spree tonight—no matter how defensible such a thing might be.

Bella deserved better than a killer.

I'd spent seven decades trying to be something other than that—anything other than a killer. Those years of effort could never make me worthy of the girl sitting beside me. And yet, I felt that if I returned to that life—the life of a killer—for even one night, I would surely put her out of my reach forever. Even if I didn't drink their blood—even if I didn't have that evidence blazing red in my eyes—wouldn't she sense the difference?

I was trying to be good enough for her. It was an impossible goal. I would keep trying.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

Her breath filled my nose, and I was reminded why I could not deserve her. After all of this, even with as much as I loved her…she still made my mouth water.

I would give her as much honesty as I could. I owed her that.

"Sometimes I have a problem with my temper, Bella." I stared out into the black night, wishing both that she would hear the horror inherent in my words and also that she would not. Mostly that she would not. *Run, Bella, run. Stay, Bella, stay.* "But it *wouldn't* be helpful for me to turn around and hunt down those…" Just thinking about it almost pulled me from the car. I took a deep breath, letting her scent scorch down my throat. "At least, that's what I'm trying to convince myself."

"Oh."

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She said nothing else. How much had she heard in my words? I glanced at her furtively, but her face was unreadable. Blank with shock, perhaps. Well, she wasn't screaming. Not yet.

It was quiet for a moment. I warred with myself, trying to be what I should be. What I couldn't be.

"Jessica and Angela will be worried," she said quietly. Her voice was very calm, and I was not sure how that could be. *Was* she in shock? Maybe tonight's events hadn't sunk in for her yet. "I was supposed to meet them."

Did she want to be away from me? Or was she just worried about her friends' worry?

I didn't answer her, but I started the car and took her back. Every inch closer I got to the town, the harder it was to hold on to my purpose. I was just so *close* to him…

If it was impossible—if I could never have nor deserve this girl—then where was the sense in letting the man go unpunished? Surely I could allow myself that much…

No. I wasn't giving up. Not yet. I wanted her too much to surrender.

We were at the restaurant where she was supposed to meet her friends before I'd even begun to make sense of my thoughts. Jessica and Angela were finished eating, and both now truly worried about Bella. They were on their way to search for her, heading off along the dark street.

It was not a good night for them to be wandering—

"How did you know where…?" Bella's unfinished question interrupted me, and I realized that I had made yet another gaffe. I'd been too distracted to remember to ask her where she was supposed to meet her friends.

But, instead of finishing the inquiry and pressing the point, Bella just shook her head and half-smiled.

What did *that* mean?

Well, I didn't have time to puzzle over her strange acceptance of my stranger knowledge. I opened my door.

"What are you doing?" she asked, sounding startled.

Not letting you out of my sight. Not allowing myself to be alone tonight. In that order. "I'm taking you to dinner."

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Well this should be interesting. It seemed like another night entirely when I'd imagined bringing Alice along and pretending to choose the same restaurant as Bella and her friends by accident. And now, here I was, practically on a date with the girl. Only it didn't count, because I wasn't giving her a chance to say no.

She already had her door half open before I'd walked around the car—it wasn't usually so frustrating to have to move at an inconspicuous speed—instead of waiting for me to get it for her. Was this because she wasn't used to being treated like a lady, or because she didn't think of me as a gentleman?

I waited for her to join me, getting more anxious as her girlfriends continued in toward the dark corner.

"Go stop Jessica and Angela before I have to track them down, too," I ordered quickly. "I don't think I could restrain myself if I ran into your other friends again." No, I would not be strong enough for that.

She shuddered, and then quickly collected herself. She took half a step after them, calling, "Jess! Angela!" in a loud voice. They turned, and she waved her arm over her head to catch their attention.

Bella! Oh, she's safe! Angela thought with relief.

Late much? Jessica grumbled to herself, but she, too, was thankful that Bella wasn't lost or hurt. This made me like her a little more than I had.

They hurried back, and then stopped, shocked, when they saw me beside her.

Uh-uh*!* Jess thought, stunned. *No freaking way!*

Edward Cullen? Did she go away by herself to find him? But why would she ask about them being out of town if she knew he was here… I got a brief flash of Bella's mortified expression when she'd asked Angela if my family was often absent from school. *No, she couldn't have known,* Angela decided.

Jessica's thoughts were moving past the surprise and on to suspicion. *Bella's been holding out on me.*

"Where have you been?" she demanded, staring at Bella, but peeking at me from the corner of her eye.

"I got lost. And then I ran into Edward," Bella said, waving one hand toward me. Her tone was remarkably normal. Like that was truly all that had happened.

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She must be in shock. That was the only explanation for her calm.

"Would it be all right if I joined you?" I asked—to be polite; I knew that they'd already eaten.

Holy crap *but he's hot!* Jessica thought, her head suddenly slightly incoherent.

Angela wasn't much more composed. *Wish we hadn't eaten. Wow. Just. Wow.*

Now why couldn't I do that to Bella?

"Er…sure," Jessica agreed.

Angela frowned. "Um, actually, Bella, we already ate while we were waiting," she admitted. "Sorry."

What? Shut up! Jess complained internally.

Bella shrugged casually. So at ease. Definitely in shock. "That's fine—I'm not hungry."

"I think you should eat something," I disagreed. She needed sugar in her bloodstream—though it smelled sweet enough as it was, I thought wryly. The horror was going to come crashing down on her momentarily, and an empty stomach wouldn't help. She was an easy fainter, as I knew from experience.

These girls wouldn't be in any danger if they went straight home. Danger didn't stalk *their* every step.

And I'd rather be alone with Bella—as long as she was willing to be alone with me.

"Do you mind if I drive Bella home tonight?" I said to Jessica before Bella could respond. "That way you won't have to wait while she eats."

"Uh, no problem, I guess…" Jessica stared intently at Bella, looking for some sign that this was what she wanted.

I want to stay…but she probably wants him to herself. Who wouldn't? Jess thought. At the same time, she watched Bella wink.

Bella *winked*?

"Okay," Angela said quickly, in a hurry to be out of the way if that was what Bella wanted. And it seemed that she did want that. "See you tomorrow, Bella…Edward." She struggled to say my name in a casual tone. Then she grabbed Jessica's hand and began towing her away.

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I would have to find some way to thank Angela for this.

Jessica's car was close by and in a bright circle of light cast by a streetlamp. Bella watched them carefully, a little crease of concern between her eyes, until they were in the car, so she must be fully aware of the danger she'd been in. Jessica waved as she drove away, and Bella waved back. It wasn't until the car disappeared that she took a deep breath and turned to look up at me.

"Honestly, I'm not hungry," she said.

Why had she waited for them to be gone before speaking? Did she truly want to be alone with me—even now, after witnessing my homicidal rage?

Whether that was the case or not, she was going to eat something.

"Humor me," I said.

I held the restaurant door open for her and waited.

She sighed, and walked through.

I walked beside her to the podium where the hostess waited. Bella still seemed entirely self-possessed. I wanted to touch her hand, her forehead, to check her temperature. But my cold hand would repulse her, as it had before.

Oh, my, the hostess's rather loud mental voice intruded into my consciousness. *My, oh my.*

It seemed to be my night to turn heads. Or was I only noticing it more because I wished so much that Bella would see me this way? We were always attractive to our prey. I'd never thought so much about it before. Usually—unless, as with people like Shelly Cope and Jessica Stanley, there was constant repetition to dull the horror—the fear kicked in fairly quickly after the initial attraction…

"A table for two?" I prompted when the hostess didn't speak.

"Oh, er, yes. Welcome to La Bella Italia." *Mmm! What a voice!* "Please follow me." Her thoughts were preoccupied—calculating.

Maybe she's his cousin. She couldn't be his sister, they don't look anything alike. But family, definitely. He *can't be with* her.

Human eyes were clouded; they saw nothing clearly. How could this small-minded woman find my physical lures—snares for prey—so attractive, and yet be unable to see the soft perfection of the girl beside me?

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Well, no need to help her out, just in case, the hostess thought as she led us to a family-sized table in the middle of the most crowded part of the restaurant. *Can I give him my number while she's there…?* she mused.

I pulled a bill from my back pocket. People were invariably cooperative when money was involved.

Bella was already taking the seat the hostess indicated without objection. I shook my head at her, and she hesitated, cocking her head to one side with curiosity. Yes, she would be very curious tonight. A crowd was not the ideal place for this conversation.

"Perhaps something more private?" I requested of the hostess, handing her the money. Her eyes widened in surprise, and then narrowed while her hand curled around the tip.

"Sure."

She peeked at the bill while she led us around a dividing wall.

Fifty dollars for a better table? Rich, too. That makes sense—I bet his jacket cost more than my last paycheck. Damn. Why does he want privacy with her*?*

She offered us a booth in a quiet corner of the restaurant where no one would be able to see us—to see Bella's reactions to whatever I would tell her. I had no clue as to what she would want from me tonight. Or what I would give her.

How much had she guessed? What explanation of tonight's events had she told herself?

"How's this?" the hostess asked.

"Perfect," I told her and, feeling slightly annoyed by her resentful attitude toward Bella, I smiled widely at her, baring my teeth. Let her see me clearly.

Whoa. "Um…your server will be right out." *He can't be real. I must be asleep. Maybe she'll disappear…maybe I'll write my number on his plate with ketchup…* She wandered away, listing slightly to the side.

Odd. She still wasn't frightened. I suddenly remembered Emmett teasing me in the cafeteria, so many weeks ago. *I'll bet I could have scared her better than that.*

Was I losing my edge?

"You really shouldn't do that to people," Bella interrupted my thoughts in a disapproving tone. "It's hardly fair."

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I stared at her critical expression. What did she mean? I hadn't frightened the hostess at all, despite my intentions. "Do what?"

"Dazzle them like that—she's probably hyperventilating in the kitchen right now."

Hmm. Bella was very nearly right. The hostess was only semi-coherent at the moment, describing her incorrect assessment of me to her friend on the wait staff.

"Oh, come on," Bella chided me when I didn't answer immediately. "You *have* to know the effect you have on people."

"I dazzle people?" That was an interesting way of phrasing it. Accurate enough for tonight. I wondered why the difference…

"You haven't noticed?" she asked, still critical. "Do you think everybody gets their way so easily?"

"Do I dazzle *you*?" I voiced my curiosity impulsively, and then the words were out, and it was too late to recall them.

But before I had time to too deeply regret speaking the words aloud she answered, "Frequently." And her cheeks took on a faint pink glow.

I dazzled her.

My silent heart swelled with a hope more intense than I could ever remember having felt before.

"Hello," someone said, the waitress, introducing herself. Her thoughts were loud, and more explicit than the hostess's, but I tuned her out. I stared at Bella's face instead of listening, watching the blood spreading under her skin, noticing not how that made my throat flame, but rather how it brightened her fair face, how it set off the cream of her skin…

The waitress was waiting for something from me. Ah, she'd asked for our drink order. I continued to stare at Bella, and the waitress grudgingly turned to look at her, too.

"I'll have a coke?" Bella said, as if asking for approval.

"Two cokes," I amended. Thirst—normal, human thirst—was a sign of shock. I would make sure she had the extra sugar from the soda in her system.

She looked healthy, though. More than healthy. She looked radiant.

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"What?" she demanded—wondering why I was staring, I guessed. I was vaguely aware that the waitress had left.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

She blinked, surprised by the question. "I'm fine."

"You don't feel dizzy, sick, cold?"

She was even more confused now. "Should I?"

"Well, I actually I'm waiting for you to go into shock." I half-smiled, expecting her denial. She would not want to be taken care of.

It took her a minute to answer me. Her eyes were slightly unfocused. She looked that way sometimes, when I smiled at her. Was she…dazzled?

I would love to believe that.

"I don't think that will happen. I've always been very good at repressing unpleasant things," she answered, a little breathless.

Did she have a lot of practice with unpleasant things, then? Was her life always this hazardous?

"Just the same," I told her. "I'll feel better when you have some sugar and food in you."

The waitress returned with the cokes and a basket of bread. She put them in front of me, and asked for my order, trying to catch my eye in the process. I indicated that she should attend to Bella, and then went back to tuning her out. She had a vulgar mind.

"Um…" Bella glanced quickly at the menu. "I'll have the mushroom ravioli."

The waitress turned back to me eagerly. "And you?"

"Nothing for me."

Bella made a slight face. Hmm. She must have noticed that I never ate food. She noticed everything. And I always forgot to be careful around her.

I waited till we were alone again.

"Drink," I insisted.

I was surprised when she complied immediately and without objection. She drank until the glass was entirely empty, so I pushed the second coke toward her, frowning a little. Thirst, or shock?

She drank a little more, and then shuddered once.

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"Are you cold?"

"It's just the coke," she said, but she shivered again, her lips trembling slightly as if her teeth were about to chatter.

The pretty blouse she wore looked too thin to protect her adequately; it clung to her like a second skin, almost as fragile as the first. She was so frail, so mortal. "Don't you have a jacket?"

"Yes." She looked around herself, a little perplexed. "Oh—I left it in Jessica's car."

I pulled off my jacket, wishing that the gesture was not marred by my body temperature. It would have been nice to have been able to offer her a warm coat. She stared at me, her cheeks warming again. What was she thinking now?

I handed her the jacket across the table, and she put it on at once, and then shuddered again.

Yes, it would be very nice to be warm.

"Thanks," she said. She took a deep breath, and then pushed the too-long sleeves back to free her hands. She took another deep breath.

Was the evening finally settling in? Her color was still good; her skin was cream and roses against the deep blue of her shirt.

"That color blue looks lovely with your skin," I complimented her. Just being honest.

She flushed, enhancing the effect.

She looked well, but there was no point in taking chances. I pushed the basket of bread toward her.

"Really," she objected, guessing my motives. "I'm not going into shock."

"You should be—a *normal* person would be. You don't even look shaken." I stared at her, disapproving, wondering why she couldn't be normal and then wondering if really wanted her to be that way.

"I feel very safe with you," she said, her eyes, again, filled with trust. Trust I didn't deserve.

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Her instincts were all wrong—backwards. That must be the problem. She didn't recognize danger the way a human being should be able to. She had the opposite reaction. Instead of running, she lingered, drawn to what should frighten her…

How could I protect her from myself when *neither* of us wanted that?

"This is more complicated than I'd planned," I murmured.

I could see her turning my words over in her head, and I wondered what she made of them. She took a breadstick and began to eat without seeming aware of the action. She chewed for a moment, and then leaned her head to one side thoughtfully.

"Usually you're in a better mood when your eyes are so light," she said in a casual tone.

Her observation, stated so matter of factly, left me reeling. "What?"

"You're always crabbier when your eyes are black—I expect it then. I have a theory about that," she added lightly.

So she had come up with her own explanation. Of course she had. I felt a deep sense of dread as I wondered how close she'd come to the truth.

"More theories?"

"Mm-hm." She chewed on another bite, entirely nonchalant. As if she weren't discussing the aspects of a monster with the monster himself.

"I hope you were more creative this time…" I lied when she didn't continue. What I really hoped was that she was *wrong*—miles wide of the mark. "Or are you still stealing from comic books?"

"Well, no, I didn't get it from a comic book," she said, a little embarrassed. "But I didn't come up with it on my own, either."

"And?" I asked between my teeth.

Surely should would not speak so calmly if she were about to scream.

As she hesitated, biting her lip, the waitress reappeared with Bella's food. I paid the server little attention as she set the plate in front of Bella and then asked if I wanted anything.

I declined, but asked for more coke. The waitress hadn't noticed the empty glasses. She took them and left.

"You were saying?" I prompted anxiously as soon as we were alone again.

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"I'll tell you about it in the car," she said in a low voice. Ah, this would be bad. She wasn't willing to speak her guesses around others. "If…" she tacked on suddenly.

"There are conditions?" I was so tense I almost growled the words.

"I do have a few questions, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, my voice hard.

Her questions would probably be enough to tell me where her thoughts were heading. But how would I answer them? With responsible lies? Or would I drive her away with truth? Or would I say nothing, unable to decide?

We sat in silence while the waitress replenished her supply of soda.

"Well, go ahead," I said, jaw locked, when she was gone.

"Why are you in Port Angeles?"

That was too easy a question—for her. It gave away nothing, while my answer, if truthful, would give away much too much. Let her reveal something first.

"Next," I said.

"But that's the easiest one!'

"Next," I said again.

She was frustrated by my refusal. She looked away from me, down to her food. Slowly, thinking hard, she took a bite and chewed with deliberation. She washed it down with more coke, and then finally looked up at me. Her eyes were narrow with suspicion.

"Okay then," she said. "Let's say, hypothetically, of course, that…someone…could know what people are thinking, read minds, you know—with just a few exceptions."

It could be worse.

This explained that little half-smile in the car. She was quick—no one else had ever guessed this about me. Except for Carlisle, and it had been rather obvious then, in the beginning, when I'd answered all his thoughts as if he'd spoken them to me. He'd understood before I had…

This question wasn't so bad. While it was clear that she knew that there was something wrong with me, was not as serious as it could have been. Mind-reading was, after all, not a facet of the vampire cannon. I went along with her hypothesis.

"Just *one* exception," I corrected. "Hypothetically."

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She fought a smile—my vague honesty pleased her. "All right, with one exception, then. How does that work? What are the limitations? How would…that someone…find someone else at exactly the right time? How would he know that she was in trouble?"

"Hypothetically?"

"Sure." Her lips twitched, and her liquid brown eyes were eager.

"Well," I hesitated. "If…that someone…"

"Let's call him 'Joe,'" she suggested.

I had to smile at her enthusiasm. Did she really think the truth would be a good thing? If my secrets were pleasant, why would I keep them from her?

"Joe, then," I agreed. "If Joe had been paying attention, the timing wouldn't have needed to be quite so exact." I shook my head and repressed a shudder at the thought of how close I had been to being too late today. "Only you could get into trouble in a town this small. You would have devastated their crime rate statistics for a decade, you know."

Her lips turned down at the corners, and pouted out. "We were speaking of a hypothetical case."

I laughed at her irritation.

Her lips, her skin… They looked so soft. I wanted to touch them. I wanted to press my fingertip against the corner of her frown and turn it up. Impossible. My skin would be repellent to her.

"Yes, we were," I said, returning to the conversation before I could depress myself too thoroughly. "Shall we call you 'Jane'?"

She leaned across the table toward me, all humor and irritation gone from her wide eyes.

"How did you know?" she asked, her voice low and intense.

Should I tell her the truth? And, if so, what portion?

I wanted to tell her. I wanted to deserve the trust I could still see on her face.

"You can trust me, you know," she whispered, and she reached one hand forward as if to touch my hands where they rested on top of the empty table before me.

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I pulled them back—hating the thought of her reaction to my frigid stone skin—and she dropped her hand.

I knew that I could trust her with protecting my secrets; she was entirely trustworthy, good to the core. But I couldn't trust her not to be horrified by them. She *should* be horrified. The truth *was* horror.

"I don't know if I have a choice anymore," I murmured. I remembered that I'd once teased her by calling her 'exceptionally unobservant.' Offended her, if I'd been judging her expressions correctly. Well, I could right that one injustice, at least. "I was wrong—you're much more observant than I gave you credit for." And, though she might not realize it, I'd given her plenty of credit already. She missed nothing.

"I thought you were always right," she said, smiling as she teased me.

"I used to be." I used to know what I was doing. I used to be always sure of my course. And now everything was chaos and tumult.

Yet I wouldn't trade it. I didn't want the life that made sense. Not if the chaos meant that I could be with Bella.

"I was wrong about you on one other thing as well," I went on, setting the record straight on another point. "You're not a magnet for accidents—that's not a broad enough classification. You are a magnet for *trouble*. If there is anything dangerous within a ten-mile radius, it will invariably find you." Why her? What had she done to deserve any of this?

Bella's face turned serious again. "And you put yourself into that category?"

Honesty was more important in regards to this question than any other. "Unequivocally."

Her eyes narrowed slightly—not suspicious now, but oddly concerned. She reached her hand across the table again, slowly and deliberately. I pulled my hands an inch away from her, but she ignored that, determined to touch me. I held my breath—not because of her scent now, but because of the sudden, overwhelming tension. Fear. My skin would disgust her. She would run away.

She brushed her fingertips lightly across the back of my hand. The heat of her gentle, willing touch was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It was almost pure pleasure.

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Would have been, except for my fear. I watched her face as she felt the cold stone of my skin, still unable to breathe.

A half-smile turned up the corners of her lips.

"Thank you," she said, meeting my stare with an intense gaze of her own. "That's twice now."

Her soft fingers lingered on my hand as if they found it pleasant to be there.

I answered her as casually as I was able. "Let's not try for three, agreed?"

She grimaced at that, but nodded.

I pulled my hands out from under hers. As exquisite as her touch felt, I wasn't going to wait for the magic of her tolerance to pass, to turn to revulsion. I hid my hands under the table.

I read her eyes; though her mind was silent, I could perceive both trust and wonder there. I realized in that moment that I *wanted* to answer her questions. Not because I owed it to her. Not because I wanted her to trust me.

I wanted her to *know* me.

"I followed you to Port Angeles," I told her, the words spilling out too quickly for me to edit them. I knew the danger of the truth, the risk I was taking. At any moment, her unnatural calm could shatter into hysterics. Contrarily, knowing this only had me talking faster. "I've never tried to keep a specific person alive before and it's much more troublesome than I would have believed. But that's probably just because it's you. Ordinary people seem to make it through the day without so many catastrophes."

I watched her, waiting.

She smiled. Her lips curved up at the edges, and her chocolate eyes warmed.

I'd just admitted to stalking her, and she was smiling.

"Did you ever think that maybe my number was up that first time, with the van, and that you've been interfering with fate?" she asked.

"That wasn't the first time," I said, staring down at the dark maroon table cloth, my shoulders bowed in shame. My barriers were down, the truth still spilling free recklessly. "Your number was up the first time I met you."

It was true, and it angered me. I had been positioned over her life like the blade of a guillotine. It was as if she had been marked for death by some cruel, unjust fate,

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and—since I'd proved an unwilling tool—that same fate continued to try to execute her. I imagined the fate personified—a grisly, jealous hag, a vengeful harpy.

I wanted something, someone, to be responsible for this—so that I would have something concrete to fight against. Something, anything to destroy, so that Bella could be safe.

Bella was very quiet; her breathing had accelerated.

I looked up at her, knowing I would finally see the fear I was waiting for. Had I not just admitted how close I'd been to killing her? Closer than the van that had come within slim inches of crushing her. And yet, her face was still calm, her eyes still tightened only with concern.

"You remember?" She had to remember that.

"Yes," she said, her voice level and grave. Her deep eyes were full of awareness.

She knew. She knew that I had wanted to murder her.

Where were the screams?

"And yet here you sit," I said, pointing out the inherent contradiction.

"Yes, here I sit…because of you." Her expression altered, turned curious, as she unsubtly changed the subject. "Because somehow you knew how to find me today…?"

Hopelessly, I pushed one more time at the barrier that protected her thoughts, desperate to understand. It made no logical sense to me. How could she even care about the rest with that glaring truth on the table?

She waited, only curious. Her skin was pale, which was natural for her, but it still concerned me. Her dinner sat nearly untouched in front of her. If I continued to tell her too much, she was going to need a buffer when the shock wore off.

I named my terms. "You eat, I'll talk."

She processed that for half a second, and then threw a bite in her mouth with a speed that belied her calm. She was more anxious for my answer than her eyes let on.

"It's harder than it should be—keeping track of you," I told her. "Usually I can find someone very easily, once I've heard their mind before."

I watched her face carefully as I said this. Guessing right was one thing, having it confirmed was another.

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She was motionless, her eyes wide. I felt my teeth clench together as I waited for her panic.

But she just blinked once, swallowed loudly, and then quickly scooped another bite into her mouth. She wanted me to continue.

"I was keeping tabs on Jessica," I went on, watching each word as it sank in. "Not carefully—like I said, only you could find trouble in Port Angeles—" I couldn't resist adding that. Did she realize that other human lives were not so plagued with near death experiences, or did she think she was normal? She was the furthest thing from normal I'd ever encountered. "And at first I didn't notice when you took off on your own. Then, when I realized that you weren't with her anymore, I went looking for you at the bookstore I saw in her head. I could tell that you hadn't gone in, and that you'd gone south…and I knew you would have to turn around soon. So I was just waiting for you, randomly searching through the thoughts of people on the street—to see if anyone had noticed you so I would know where you were. I had no reason to be worried…but I was strangely anxious…" My breath came faster as I remembered that feeling of panic. Her scent blazed in my throat and I was glad. It was a pain that meant she was alive. As long as I burned, she was safe.

"I started to drive in circles, still…listening." I hoped the word made sense to her. This had to be confusing. "The sun was finally setting, and I was about to get out, and follow you on foot. And then—"

As the memory took me—perfectly clear and as vivid as if I was in the moment again—I felt the same murderous fury wash through my body, locking it into ice.

I wanted him dead. I needed him dead. My jaw clenched tight as I concentrated on holding myself here at the table. Bella still needed me. That was what mattered.

"Then what?" she whispered, her dark eyes wide.

"I heard what they were thinking," I said through my teeth, unable to keep the words from coming out in a growl. "I saw your face in his mind."

I could hardly resist the urge to kill. I still knew precisely where to find him. His black thoughts sucked at the night sky, pulling me toward them…

I covered my face, knowing my expression was that of a monster, a hunter, a killer. I fixed her image behind my closed eyes to control myself, focusing only on her

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face. The delicate framework of her bones, the thin sheath of her pale skin—like silk stretched over glass, incredibly soft and easy to shatter. She was too vulnerable for this world. She *needed* a protector. And, through some twisted mismanagement of destiny, I was the closest thing available.

I tried to explain my violent reaction so that she would understand.

"It was very…hard—you can't imagine how hard—for me to simply take you away, and leave them…alive," I whispered. "I could have let you go with Jessica and Angela, but I was afraid if you left me alone, I would go looking for them."

For the second time tonight, I confessed to an intended murder. At least this one was defensible.

She was quiet as I struggled to control myself. I listened to her heartbeat. The rhythm was irregular, but it slowed as the time passed until it was steady again. Her breathing, too, was low and even.

I was too close to the edge. I needed to get her home before…

Would I kill him, then? Would I become a murderer again when she trusted me? Was there any way to stop myself?

She'd promised to tell me her latest theory when we were alone. Did I want to hear it? I was anxious for it, but would the reward for my curiosity be worse than not knowing?

At any rate, she must have had enough truth for one night.

I looked at her again, and her face was paler than before, but composed.

"Are you ready to go home?" I asked.

"I'm ready to leave," she said, choosing her words carefully, as if a simple 'yes' did not fully express what she wanted to say.

Frustrating.

The waitress returned. She'd heard Bella's last statement as she'd dithered on the other side of the partition, wondering what more she could offer me. I wanted to roll my eyes at some of the offerings she'd had in mind.

"How are we doing?" she asked me.

"We're ready for the check, thank you," I told her, my eyes on Bella.

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The waitress's breathing spiked and she was momentarily—to use Bella's phrasing—dazzled by my voice.

In a sudden moment of perception, hearing the way my voice sounded in this inconsequential human's head, I realized why I seemed to be attracting so much admiration tonight—unmarred by the usual fear.

It was because of Bella. Trying so hard to be safe for her, to be less frightening, to be *human*, I truly had lost my edge. The other humans saw only beauty now, with my innate horror so carefully under control.

I looked up at the waitress, waiting for her to recover herself. It was sort of humorous, now that I understood the reason.

"Sure," she stuttered. "Here you go."

She handed me the folder with the bill, thinking of the card she'd slid in behind the receipt. A card with her name and telephone number on it.

Yes, it was rather funny.

I had money ready again. I gave the folder back at once, so she wouldn't waste any time waiting for a call that would never come.

"No change," I told her, hoping the size of the tip would assuage her disappointment.

I stood, and Bella quickly followed suit. I wanted to offer her my hand, but I thought that might be pushing my luck a little too far for one night. I thanked the waitress, my eyes never leaving Bella's face. Bella seemed to be finding something amusing, too.

We walked out; I walked as close beside her as I dared. Close enough that the warmth coming off her body was like a physical touch against the left side of my body. As I held the door for her, she sighed quietly, and I wondered what regret made her sad. I stared into her eyes, about to ask, when she suddenly looked at the ground, seeming embarrassed. It made me more curious, even as it made me reluctant to ask. The silence between us continued while I opened her door for her and then got into the car.

I turned the heater on—the warmer weather had come to an abrupt end; the cold car must be uncomfortable for her. She huddled in my jacket, a small smile on her lips.

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I waited, postponing conversation until the lights of the boardwalk faded. It made me feel more alone with her.

Was that the right thing? Now that I was focused only on her, the car seemed very small. Her scent swirled through it with the current of the heater, building and strengthening. It grew into its own force, like another entity in the car. A presence that demanded recognition.

It had that; I burned. The burning was acceptable, though. It seemed strangely appropriate to me. I had been given so much tonight—more than I'd expected. And here she was, still willingly at my side. I owed something in return for that. A sacrifice. A burnt offering.

Now if I could just keep it to that; just burn, and nothing more. But the venom filled my mouth, and my muscles tensed in anticipation, as if I were hunting…

I had to keep such thoughts from my mind. And I knew what would distract me.

"Now," I said to her, fear of her response taking the edge off the burn. "It's your turn."

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9. Theory

"Can I ask just one more?" she entreated instead of answering my demand.

I was on edge, anxious for the worst. And yet, how tempting it was to prolong this moment. To have Bella with me, willingly, for just a few seconds longer. I sighed at the dilemma, and then said, "One."

"Well…," she hesitated for a moment, as if deciding which question to voice. "You said you knew I hadn't gone into the bookstore, and that I had gone south. I was just wondering how you know that."

I glared out the windshield. Here was another question that revealed nothing on her part, and too much on mine.

"I thought we were past all the evasiveness," she said, her tone critical and disappointed.

How ironic. She was relentlessly evasive, without even trying.

Well, she wanted me to be direct. And this conversation wasn't going anywhere good, regardless.

"Fine, then," I said. "I followed your scent."

I wanted to watch her face, but I was afraid of what I would see. Instead, I listened to her breath accelerate and then stabilize. She spoke again after a moment, and her voice was steadier than I would have expected.

"And then you didn't answer one of my first questions…" she said.

I looked down at her, frowning. She was stalling, too.

"Which one?"

"How does it work—the mind reading thing?" she asked, reiterating her question from the restaurant. "Can you read anybody's mind, anywhere? How do you do it? Can the rest of your family…?" She trailed off, flushing again.

"That's more than one," I said.

She just looked at me, waiting for her answers.

And why not tell her? She'd already guessed most of this, and it was an easier subject that the one that loomed.

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"No, it's just me. And I can't hear anyone, anywhere. I have to be fairly close. The more familiar someone's…'voice' is, the farther away I can hear them. But still, no more than a few miles." I tried to think of a way to describe it so that she would understand. An analogy that she could relate to. "It's a little like being in a huge hall filled with people, everyone talking at once. It's just a hum—a buzzing of voices in the background. Until I focus on one voice, and then what they're thinking is clear. Most of the time I tune it all out—it can be very distracting. And then it's easier to seem *normal*," —I grimaced— "when I'm not accidentally answering someone's thoughts rather than their words."

"Why do you think you can't hear me?" she wondered.

I gave her another truth and another analogy.

"I don't know," I admitted. "The only guess I have is that maybe your mind doesn't work the same way the rest of theirs do. Like your thoughts are on the AM frequency and I'm only getting FM."

I realized that she would not like this analogy. The anticipation of her reaction had me smiling. She didn't disappoint.

"My mind doesn't work right?" she asked, her voice rising with chagrin. "I'm a freak?"

Ah, the irony again.

"I hear voices in my mind and you're worried that *you're* the freak." I laughed. She understood all the small things, and yet the big ones she got backwards. Always the wrong instincts…

Bella was gnawing on her lip, and the crease between her eyes was etched deep.

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "It's just a theory…" And there was a more important theory to be discussed. I was anxious to get it over with. Each passing second was beginning to feel more and more like borrowed time.

"Which brings us back to you," I said, divided in two, both anxious and reluctant.

She sighed, still chewing her lip—I worried that she would hurt herself. She stared into my eyes, her face troubled.

"Aren't we past all the evasions now?" I asked quietly.

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She looked down, struggling with some internal dilemma. Suddenly, she stiffened and her eyes flew wide open. Fear flashed across her face for the first time.

"Holy crow!" she gasped.

I panicked. What had she seen? How had I frightened her?

Then she shouted, "Slow down!"

"What's wrong?" I didn't understand where her terror was coming from.

"You're going a hundred miles an hour!" she yelled at me. She flashed a look out the window, and recoiled from the dark trees racing past us.

This little thing, just a bit of speed, had her shouting in fear?

I rolled my eyes. "Relax, Bella."

"Are you trying to kill us?" she demanded, her voice high and tight.

"We're not going to crash," I promised her.

She sucked in a sharp breath, and then spoke in a slightly more level tone. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I always drive like this."

I met her gaze, amused by her shocked expression.

"Keep your eyes on the road!" she shouted.

"I've never been in an accident, Bella. I've never even gotten a ticket." I grinned at her and touched my forehead. It made it even more comical—the absurdity of being able to joke with her about something so secret and strange. "Built in radar detector."

"Very funny," she said sarcastically, her voice more frightened than angry. "Charlie's a cop, remember? I was raised to abide by traffic laws. Besides, if you turn us into a Volvo pretzel around a tree trunk, you can probably just walk away."

"Probably," I repeated, and than laughed without humor. Yes, we would fare quite differently in a car accident. She was right to be afraid, despite my driving abilities… "But you can't."

With a sigh, I let the car drift to a crawl. "Happy?"

She eyed the speedometer. "Almost."

Was this still too fast for her? "I hate driving slow," I muttered, but let the needle slide another notch down.

"This is slow?" she asked.

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"Enough commentary on my driving," I said impatiently. How many times had she dodged my question now? Three times? Four? Were her speculations that horrific? I had to know—immediately. "I'm still waiting for your latest theory."

She bit her lip again, and her expression became upset, almost pained.

I reigned in my impatience and softened my voice. I didn't want her to be distressed.

"I won't laugh," I promised, wishing that it was only embarrassment that made her unwilling to talk.

"I'm more afraid that you'll be angry with me," she whispered.

I forced my voice to stay even. "Is it that bad?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

She looked down, refusing to meet my eyes. The seconds passed.

"Go ahead," I encouraged.

Her voice was small. "I don't know how to start."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" I remembered her words before dinner. "You said you didn't come up with this on your own."

"No," she agreed, and then was silent again.

I thought about things that might have inspired her. "What got you started—a book? A movie?"

I should have looked through her collections when she was out of the house. I had no idea if Bram Stoker or Anne Rice was there in her stack of worn paperbacks…

"No," she said again. "It was Saturday, at the beach."

I hadn't expected that. The local gossip about us had never strayed into anything too bizarre—or too precise. Was there a new rumor I'd missed? Bella peeked up from her hands and saw the surprise on my face.

"I ran into an old family friend—Jacob Black," she went on. "His dad and Charlie have been friends since I was a baby."

Jacob Black—the name was not familiar, and yet it reminded me of something…some *time*, long ago… I stared out of the windshield, flipping through memories to find the connection.

"His dad is one of the Quileute elders," she said.

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Jacob Black. *Ephraim Black*. A descendant, no doubt.

It was as bad as it could get.

She knew the truth.

My mind was flying through the ramifications as the car flew around the dark curves in the road, my body rigid with anguish—motionless except for the small, automatic actions it took to steer the car.

She knew the truth.

But…if she'd learned the truth Saturday…then she'd known it all evening long…and yet…

"We went for a walk," she went on. "And he was telling me about some old legends—trying to scare me, I think. He told me one…"

She stopped short, but there was no need for her qualms now; I knew what she was going to say. The only mystery left was why she was here with me now.

"Go on," I said.

"About vampires," she breathed, the words less than a whisper.

Somehow, it was even worse than knowing that she knew, hearing her speak the word aloud. I flinched at the sound of it, and then controlled myself again.

"And you immediately thought of me?" I asked.

"No. He…mentioned your family."

How ironic that it would be Ephraim's own progeny that would violate the treaty he'd vowed to uphold. A grandson, or great-grandson perhaps. How many years had it been? Seventy?

I should have realized that it was not the old men who *believed* in the legends that would be the danger. Of course, the younger generation—those who would have been warned, but would have thought the ancient superstitions laughable—of course that was where the danger of exposure would lie.

I supposed this meant I was now free to slaughter the small, defenseless tribe on the coastline, were I so inclined. Ephraim and his pack of protectors were long dead…

"He just thought it was a silly superstition," Bella said suddenly, her voice edged with a new anxiety. "He didn't expect me to think anything of it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her twist her hands uneasily.

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"It was my fault," she said after a brief pause, and then she hung her head as if she were ashamed. "I forced him to tell me."

"Why?" It wasn't so hard to keep my voice level now. The worst was already done. As long as we spoke of the details of the revelation, we didn't have to move on to the consequences of it.

"Lauren said something about you—she was trying to provoke me." She made a little face at the memory. I was slightly distracted, wondering how Bella would be provoked by someone talking about me… "And an older boy from the tribe said your family didn't come to the reservation, only it sounded like he meant something different. So I got Jacob alone and I tricked it out of him."

Her head dropped even lower as she admitted this, and her expression looked…guilty.

I looked away from her and laughed out loud. *She* felt guilty? What could she possibly have done to deserve censure of any kind?

"Tricked him how?" I asked.

"I tried to flirt—it worked better than I thought it would," she explained, and her voice turned incredulous at the memory of that success.

I could just imagine—considering the attraction she seemed to have for all things male, totally unconscious on her part—how overwhelming she would be when she *tried* to be attractive. I was suddenly full of pity for the unsuspecting boy she'd unleashed such a potent force on.

"I'd like to have seen that," I said, and then I laughed again with the black humor. I wished I could have heard the boy's reaction, witnessed the devastation for myself. "And you accused me of dazzling people—poor Jacob Black."

I wasn't as angry with the source of my exposure as I would have expected to feel. He didn't know better. And how could I expect anyone to deny this girl what she wanted? No, I only felt sympathy for the damage she would have done to his peace of mind.

I felt her blush heat the air between us. I glanced at her, and she was staring out her window. She didn't speak again.

"What did you do then?" I prompted. Time to get back to the horror story.

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"I did some research on the internet."

Ever practical. "And did that convince you?"

"No," she said. "Nothing fit. Most of it was kind of silly. And then—"

She broke off again, and I heard her teeth lock together.

"What?" I demanded. What had she found? What had made sense of the nightmare for her?

There was a short paused, and then she whispered, "I decided it didn't matter."

Shock froze my thoughts for a half-second, and then it all fit together. Why she'd sent her friends away tonight rather than escape with them. Why she had gotten into my car with me again instead of running, screaming for the police…

Her reactions were always wrong—always completely wrong. She pulled danger toward herself. She invited it.

"It didn't *matter*?" I said through my teeth, anger filling me. How was I supposed to protect someone so…so…so determined to be unprotected?

"No," she said in a low voice that was inexplicably tender. "It doesn't matter to me what you are."

She was impossible.

"You don't care if I'm a monster? If I'm not *human*?"

"No."

I started to wonder if she was entirely stable.

I supposed that I could arrange for her to receive the best care available… Carlisle would have the connections to find her the most skilled doctors, the most talented therapists. Perhaps something could be done to fix whatever it was that was wrong with her, what ever it was that made her content to sit beside a vampire with her heart beating calmly and steadily. I would watch over the facility, naturally, and visit as often as I was allowed…

"You're angry," she sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything."

As if her hiding these disturbing tendencies would help either of us.

"No. I'd rather know what you're thinking—even if what you're thinking is insane."

"So I'm wrong again?" she asked, a bit belligerent now.

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"That's not what I was referring to!" My teeth clenched together again. "'It doesn't matter'!" I repeated in a scathing tone.

She gasped. "I'm right?"

"Does it *matter*?" I countered.

She took a deep breath. I waited angrily for her answer.

"Not really," she said, her voice composed again. "But I *am* curious."

Not really. It didn't really matter. She didn't care. She knew I was inhuman, a monster, and this didn't really matter to her.

Aside from my worries about her sanity, I began to feel a swelling of hope. I tried to quash it.

"What are you curious about?" I asked her. There were no secrets left, only minor details.

"How old are you?" she asked.

My answer was automatic and ingrained. "Seventeen."

"And how long have you been seventeen?"

I tried not to smile at the patronizing tone. "A while," I admitted.

"Okay," she said, abruptly enthusiastic. She smiled up at me. When I stared back, anxious again about her mental health, she smiled wider. I grimaced.

"Don't laugh," she warned. "But how can you come out during the daytime?"

I laughed despite her request. Her research had not netted her anything unusual, it seemed. "Myth," I told her.

"Burned by the sun?"

"Myth."

"Sleeping in coffins?"

"Myth."

Sleep had not been a part of my life for so long—not until these last few nights, as I'd watched Bella dreaming…

"I can't sleep," I murmured, answering her question more fully.

She was silent for a moment.

"At all?" she asked.

"Never," I breathed.

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I stared into her eyes, wide under the thick fringe of lashes, and yearned for sleep. Not for oblivion, as I had before, not to escape boredom, but because I wanted to *dream*. Maybe, if I could be unconscious, if I could dream, I could live for a few hours in a world where she and I could be together. She dreamed of me. I wanted to dream of her.

She stared back at me, her expression full of wonder. I had to look away.

I could not dream of her. She should not dream of me.

"You haven't asked me the most important question yet," I said, my silent chest colder and harder than before. She had to be forced to understand. At some point, she would have to realize what she was doing now. She must be made to see that this all *did* matter—more than any other consideration. Considerations like the fact that I loved her.

"Which one is that?" she asked, surprised and unaware.

This only made my voice harder. "You aren't concerned about my diet?"

"Oh. That." She spoke in a quiet tone that I couldn't interpret.

"Yes, that. Don't you want to know if I drink blood?"

She cringed away from my question. Finally. She was understanding.

"Well, Jacob said something about that," she said.

"What did Jacob say?"

"He said you didn't…hunt people. He said your family wasn't supposed to be dangerous because you only hunted animals."

"He said we weren't dangerous?" I repeated cynically.

"Not exactly," she clarified. "He said you weren't *supposed* to be dangerous. But the Quileutes still didn't want you on their land, just in case."

I stared at the road, my thoughts in a hopeless snarl, my throat aching with the familiar fiery thirst.

"So, was he right?" she asked, as calmly as if she were confirming a weather report. "About not hunting people?"

"The Quileutes have a long memory."

She nodded to herself, thinking hard.

"Don't let that make you complacent, though," I said quickly. "They're right to keep their distance from us. We are still dangerous."

"I don't understand."

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No she didn't. How to make her see?

"We try," I told her. "We're usually very good at what we do. Sometimes we make mistakes. Me, for example, allowing myself to be alone with you."

Her scent was still a force in the car. I was growing used to it, I could almost ignore it, but there was no denying that my body still yearned toward her for the wrong reason. My mouth was swimming with venom.

"This is a mistake?" she asked, and there was heartbreak in her voice. The sound of it disarmed me. She wanted to be with me—despite everything, she wanted to be with me.

Hope swelled again, and I beat it back.

"A very dangerous one," I told her truthfully, wishing the truth could really somehow cease to matter.

She didn't respond for a moment. I heard her breathing change—it hitched in strange ways that did not sound like fear.

"Tell me more," she said suddenly, her voice distorted by anguish.

I examined her carefully.

She was in pain. How had I allowed *this*?

"What more do you want to know?" I asked, trying to think of a way to keep her from hurting. She should not hurt. I couldn't let her be hurt.

"Tell me why you hunt animals instead of people," she said, still anguished.

Wasn't it obvious? Or maybe this didn't matter to her either.

"I don't *want* to be a monster," I muttered.

"But animals aren't enough?"

I searched for another comparison, a way that she could understand. "I can't be sure, of course, but I'd compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke. It doesn't completely satiate the hunger—or rather thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist. Most of the time." My voice got lower; I was ashamed of danger I had allowed her to be in. Danger I continued to allow… "Sometimes it's more difficult than others."

"Is it very difficult for you now?"

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I sighed. Of course she would ask the question I didn't want to answer. "Yes," I admitted.

I expected her physical response correctly this time: her breathing held steady, her heart kept its even pattern. I expected it, but I did not understand it. How could she not be afraid?

"But you're not hungry now," she declared, perfectly sure of herself.

"Why do you think that?"

"Your eyes," she said, her tone offhand. "I told you I had a theory. I've noticed that people—men in particular—are crabbier when they're hungry."

I chuckled at her description: *crabby*. There was an understatement. But she was dead right, as usual. "You are observant, aren't you?" I laughed again.

She smiled a little, the crease returning between her eyes as if she were concentrating on something.

"Were you hunting this weekend, with Emmett?" she asked after my laugh had faded. The casual way she spoke was as fascinating as it was frustrating. Could she really accept so much in stride? I was closer to shock than she seemed to be.

"Yes," I told her, and then, as I was about to leave it at that, I felt the same urge I'd had in the restaurant: I wanted her to know me. "I didn't want to leave," I went on slowly, "but it was necessary. It's a bit easier to be around you when I'm not thirsty."

"Why didn't you want to leave?"

I took a deep breath, and then turned to meet her gaze. This kind of honesty was difficult in a very different way.

"It makes me…anxious," I supposed that word would suffice, though it wasn't strong enough, "to be away from you. I wasn't joking when I asked you to try not to fall in the ocean or get run over last Thursday. I was distracted all weekend, worrying about you. And after what happened tonight, I'm surprised that you did make it through a whole weekend unscathed." Then I remembered the scrapes on her palms. "Well, not totally unscathed," I amended.

"What?"

"Your hands," I reminded her.

She sighed and grimaced. "I fell."

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I'd guessed right. "That's what I thought," I said, unable to contain my smile. "I suppose, being you, it could have been much worse—and that possibility tormented me the entire time I was away. It was a very long three days. I really got on Emmett's nerves." Honestly, that didn't belong in the past tense. I was probably still irritating Emmett, and all the rest of my family, too. Except Alice…

"Three days?" she asked, her voice suddenly sharp. "Didn't you just get back today?"

I didn't understand the edge in her voice. "No, we got back Sunday."

"Then why weren't any of you in school?" she demanded. Her irritation confused me. She didn't seem to realize that this question was one that related to mythology again.

"Well, you asked if the sun hurt me, and it doesn't," I said. "But I can't go out in the sunlight, at least, not where anyone can see."

That distracted her from her mysterious annoyance. "Why?" she asked, leaning her head to one side.

I doubted I could come up with the appropriate analogy to explain this one. So I just told her, "I'll show you sometime." And then I wondered if this was a promise I would end up breaking. Would I see her again, after tonight? Did I love her enough yet to be able to bear leaving her?

"You might have called me," she said.

What an odd conclusion. "But I knew you were safe."

"But *I* didn't know where *you* were. I—" She came to an abrupt stop, and looked at her hands.

"What?"

"I didn't like it," she said shyly, the skin over her cheekbones warming. "Not seeing you. It makes me anxious, too."

Are you happy *now?* I demanded of myself. Well, here was my reward for hoping.

I was bewildered, elated, horrified—mostly horrified—to realize that all my wildest imaginings were not so far off the mark. This was why it didn't matter to her that I was a monster. It was exactly the same reason that the rules no longer mattered to me.

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Why right and wrong were no longer compelling influences. Why all my priorities had shifted one rung down to make room for this girl at the very top.

Bella cared for me, too.

I knew it could be nothing in comparison to how I loved her. But it was enough for her to risk her life to sit here with me. To do so gladly.

Enough to cause her pain if I did the right thing and left her.

Was there anything I could do now that would *not* hurt her? Anything at all?

I should have stayed away. I should never have come back to Forks. I would cause her nothing but pain.

Would that stop me from staying now? From making it worse?

The way I felt right now, feeling her warmth against my skin…

No. Nothing would stop me.

"Ah," I groaned to myself. "This is wrong."

"What did I say?" she asked, quick to take the blame on herself.

"Don't you see, Bella? It's one thing for me to make myself miserable, but a wholly other thing for you to be so involved. I don't want to hear that you feel that way." It was the truth, it was a lie. The most selfish part of me was flying with the knowledge that she wanted me as I wanted her. "It's wrong. It's not safe. I'm dangerous, Bella—please, grasp that."

"No." Her lips pouted out petulantly.

"I'm serious." I was battling with myself so strongly—half desperate for her to accept, half desperate to keep the warnings from escaping—that the words came through my teeth as a growl.

"So am I," she insisted. "I told you, it doesn't matter what you are. It's too late."

Too late? The world was bleakly black and white for one endless second as I watched the shadows crawl across the sunny lawn toward Bella's sleeping form in my memory. Inevitable, unstoppable. They stole the color from her skin, and plunged her into darkness.

Too late? Alice's vision swirled in my head, Bella's blood red eyes staring back at me impassively. Expressionless—but there was no way that she could *not* hate me for that future. Hate me for stealing everything from her. Stealing her life and her soul.

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It could not be too late.

"Never say that," I hissed.

She stared out her window, and her teeth bit into her lip again. Her hands were balled into tight fists in her lap. Her breathing hitched and broke.

"What are you thinking?" I had to know.

She shook her head without looking at me. I saw something glisten, like a crystal, on her cheek.

Agony. "Are you crying?" I'd made her *cry*. I'd hurt her that much.

She scrubbed the tears away with the back of her hand.

"No," she lied, her voice breaking.

Some long buried instinct had me reaching out toward her—in that one second I felt more human than I ever had. And then I remembered that I was…not. And I lowered my hand.

"I'm sorry," I said, my jaw locked. How could I ever tell her how sorry I was? Sorry for all the stupid mistakes I'd made. Sorry for my never-ending selfishness. Sorry that she was so unfortunate as to have inspired this first, tragic love of mine. Sorry also for the things beyond my control—that I'd been the monster chosen by fate to end her life in the first place.

I took a deep breath—ignoring my wretched reaction to the flavor in the car—and tried to collect myself.

I wanted to change the subject, to think of something else. Lucky for me, my curiosity about the girl was insatiable. I always had a question.

"Tell me something," I said.

"Yes?" she asked huskily, tears still in her voice.

"What were you thinking tonight, just before I came around the corner? I couldn't understand your expression—you didn't look that scared, you looked like you were concentrating very hard on something." I remembered her face—forcing myself to forget whose eyes I was looking through—the look of determination there.

"I was trying to remember how to incapacitate an attacker," she said, her voice more composed. "You know, self defense. I was going to smash his nose into his brain." Her composure did not last to the end of her explanation. Her tone twisted until it

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seethed with hate. This was no hyperbole, and her kittenish fury was not humorous now. I could see her frail figure—just silk over glass—overshadowed by the meaty, heavy-fisted human monsters who would have hurt her. The fury boiled in the back of my head.

"You were going to fight them?" I wanted to groan. Her instincts were deadly—to herself. "Didn't you think about running?"

"I fall down a lot when I run," she said sheepishly.

"What about screaming for help?"

"I was getting to that part."

I shook my head in disbelief. How had she managed to stay alive before she'd come to Forks?

"You were right," I told her, a sour edge to my voice. "I'm definitely fighting fate trying to keep you alive."

She sighed, and glanced out the window. Then she looked back at me.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" she demanded abruptly.

As long as I was on my way to hell—I might as well enjoy the journey.

"Yes—I have a paper due, too." I smiled at her, and it felt good to do this. "I'll save you a seat at lunch."

Her heart fluttered; my dead heart suddenly felt warmer.

I stopped the car in front of her father's house. She made no move to leave me.

"Do you *promise* to be there tomorrow?" she insisted.

"I promise."

How could doing the wrong thing give me so much happiness? Surely there was something amiss in that.

She nodded to herself, satisfied, and started to remove my jacket.

"You can keep it," I assured her quickly. I rather wanted to leave her with something of myself. A token, like the bottle cap that was in my pocket now… "You don't have a jacket for tomorrow."

She handed it back to me, smiling ruefully. "I don't want to have to explain to Charlie," she told me.

I would imagine not. I smiled at her. "Oh, right."

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She put her hand on the door handle, and then stopped. Unwilling to leave, just as I was unwilling for her to go.

To have her unprotected, even for a few moments…

Peter and Charlotte were well on their way by now, long past Seattle, no doubt. But there were always others. This world was not a safe place for any human, and for her it seemed to be more dangerous than it was for the rest.

"Bella?" I asked, surprised at the pleasure there was in simply speaking her name.

"Yes?"

"Will you promise me something?"

"Yes," she agreed easily, and then her eyes tightened as if she'd thought of a reason to object.

"Don't go into the woods alone," I warned her, wondering if this request would trigger the objection in her eyes.

She blinked, startled. "Why?"

I glowered into the untrustworthy darkness. The lack of light was no problem for *my* eyes, but neither would it trouble another hunter. It only blinded humans.

"I'm not always the most dangerous thing out there," I told her. "Let's leave it at that."

She shivered, but recovered quickly and was even smiling when she told me, "Whatever you say."

Her breath touched my face, so sweet and fragrant.

I could stay here all night like this, but she needed her sleep. The two desires seemed equally strong as they continually warred inside me: wanting her versus wanting her to be safe.

I sighed at the impossibilities. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said, knowing that I would see her much sooner than that. She wouldn't see *me* until tomorrow, though.

"Tomorrow, then," she agreed as she opened her door.

Agony again, watching her leave.

I leaned after her, wanting to hold her here. "Bella?"

She turned, and then froze, surprised to find our faces so close together.

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I, too, was overwhelmed by the proximity. The heat rolled off her in waves, caressing my face. I could all but feel the silk of her skin…

Her heartbeat stuttered, and her lips fell open.

"Sleep well," I whispered, and leaned away before the urgency in my body—either the familiar thirst or the very new and strange hunger I suddenly felt—could make me do something that might hurt her.

She sat there motionless for a moment, her eyes wide and stunned. Dazzled, I guessed.

As was I.

She recovered—though her face was still a bit bemused—and half fell out of the car, tripping over her feet and having to catch the frame of the car to right herself.

I chuckled—hopefully it was too quiet for her to hear.

I watched her stumble her way up to the pool of light that surrounded the front door. Safe for the moment. And I would be back soon to make sure.

I could feel her eyes follow me as I drove down the dark street. Such a different sensation than I was accustomed to. Usually, I could simply *watch* myself through someone's following eyes, were I of a mind to. This was strangely exciting—this intangible sensation of watching eyes. I knew it was just because they were *her* eyes.

A million thoughts chased each other through my head as I drove aimlessly into the night.

For a long time I circled through the streets, going nowhere, thinking of Bella and the incredible release of having the truth known. No longer did I have to dread that she would find out what I was. She knew. It didn't matter to her. Even though this was obviously a bad thing for her, it was amazingly liberating for me.

More than that, I thought of Bella and requited love. She couldn't love me the way I loved her—such an overpowering, all-consuming, crushing love would probably break her fragile body. But she felt strongly enough. Enough to subdue the instinctive fear. Enough to want to be with me. And being with her was the greatest happiness I had ever known.

For a while—as I was all alone and hurting no one else for a change—I allowed myself to feel that happiness without dwelling on the tragedy. Just to be happy that she

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cared for me. Just to exult in the triumph of winning her affection. Just to imagine day after day of sitting close to her, hearing her voice and earning her smiles.

I replayed that smile in my head, seeing her full lips pull up at the corners, the hint of a dimple that touched her pointed chin, the way her eyes warmed and melted… Her fingers had felt so warm and soft on my hand tonight. I imagined how it would feel to touch the delicate skin that stretched over her cheekbones—silky, warm…so fragile. Silk over glass…frighteningly breakable.

I didn't see where my thoughts were leading until it was too late. As I dwelt on that devastating vulnerability, new images of her face intruded on my fantasies.

Lost in the shadows, pale with fear—yet her jaw tight and determined, her eyes fierce, full of concentration, her slim body braced to strike at the hulking forms that gathered around her, nightmares in the gloom…

"Ah," I groaned as the simmering hate that I'd all but forgotten in the joy of loving her burst again into an inferno of rage.

I was alone. Bella was, I trusted, safe inside her home; for a moment I was fiercely glad that Charlie Swan—head of the local law enforcement, trained and armed—was her father. That ought to mean something, provide some shelter for her.

She was safe. It would not take me so very long to avenge the insult…

No. She deserved better. I could not allow her to care for a murderer.

But…what about the others?

Bella was safe, yes. Angela and Jessica were also, surely, safe in their beds.

Yet a monster was loose in the streets of Port Angeles. A human monster—did that make him the humans' problem? To commit the murder I ached to commit was wrong. I knew that. But leaving him free to attack again could not be the right thing either.

The blond hostess from the restaurant. The waitress I'd never really looked at. Both had irritated me in a trivial way, but that did not mean they deserved to be in danger.

Either one of them might be somebody's Bella.

That realization decided me.

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I turned the car north, accelerating now that I had a purpose. Whenever I had a problem that was beyond me—something tangible like this—I knew where I could go for help.

Alice was sitting on the porch, waiting for me. I pulled to a stop in front of the house rather than going around to the garage.

"Carlisle's in his study," Alice told me before I could ask.

"Thank you," I said, tousling her hair as I passed.

Thank you *for returning my call,* she thought sarcastically.

"Oh." I paused by the door, pulling out my phone and flipping it open. "Sorry. I didn't even check to see who it was. I was…busy."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, too. By the time I saw what was going to happen, you were on your way."

"It was close," I murmured.

Sorry, she repeated, ashamed of herself.

It was easy to be generous, knowing that Bella was fine. "Don't be. I know you can't catch everything. No one expects you to be omniscient, Alice."

"Thanks."

"I almost asked you out to dinner tonight—did you catch that before I changed my mind?"

She grinned. "No, I missed that one, too. Wish I'd known. I would have come."

"What were you concentrating on, that you missed so much?"

Jasper's thinking about our anniversary. She laughed. *He's trying not to make a decision on my gift, but I think I have a pretty good idea…*

"You're shameless."

"Yep."

She pursed her lips, and stared up at me, a hint of accusation in her expression. *I paid better attention later. Are you going to tell them that she knows?*

I sighed. "Yes. Later."

I won't say anything. Do me a favor and tell Rosalie when I'm not around, okay?

I flinched. "Sure."

Bella took it pretty well.

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"Too well."

Alice grinned at me. *Don't underestimate Bella.*

I tried to block the image I didn't want to see—Bella and Alice, best of friends.

Impatient now, I sighed heavily. I wanted to be through with the next part of the evening; I wanted it over with. But I was a little worried to leave Forks…

"Alice…" I began. She saw what I was planning to ask.

She'll be fine tonight. I'm keeping a better watch now. She sort of needs twenty-four hour supervision, doesn't she?

"At least."

"Anyway, you'll be with her soon enough."

I took a deep breath. The words were beautiful to me.

"Go on—get this done so you can be where you want to be," she told me.

I nodded, and hurried up to Carlisle's room.

He was waiting for me, his eyes on the door rather than the thick book on his desk.

"I heard Alice tell you where to find me," he said, and smiled.

It was a relief to be with him, to see the empathy and deep intelligence in his eyes. Carlisle would know what to do.

"I need help."

"Anything, Edward," he promised.

"Did Alice tell you what happened to Bella tonight?"

Almost happened, he amended.

"Yes, almost. I've got a dilemma, Carlisle. You see, I want…very much…to kill him." The words started to flow fast and passionate. "So much. But I know that would be wrong, because it would be vengeance, not justice. All anger, no impartiality. Still, it can't be right to leave a serial rapist and killer wandering Port Angeles! I don't know the humans there, but I can't let someone else take Bella's place as his victim. Those other women—someone might feel about them the way I feel about Bella. Might suffer what I would have suffered if she'd been harmed. It's not right—"

His wide, unexpected smile stopped the rush of my words cold.

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She's very good for you, isn't she? So much compassion, so much control. I'm impressed.

"I'm not looking for compliments, Carlisle."

"Of course not. But I can't help my thoughts, can I?" He smiled again. "I'll take care of it. You can rest easy. No one else will be harmed in Bella's place."

I saw the plan in his head. It wasn't exactly what I wanted, it did not satisfy my craving for brutality, but I could see that it was the right thing.

"I'll show you where to find him," I said.

"Let's go."

He grabbed his black bag on the way. I would have preferred a more aggressive form of sedation—like a cracked skull—but I would let Carlisle do this his way.

We took my car. Alice was still on the steps. She grinned and waved as we drove away. I saw that she had looked ahead for me; we would have no difficulties.

The trip was very short on the dark, empty road. I left off my headlights to keep from attracting attention. It made me smile to think how Bella would have reacted to *this* pace. I'd already been driving slower than usual—to prolong my time with her—when she'd objected.

Carlisle was thinking of Bella, too.

I didn't foresee that she would be so good for him. That's unexpected. Perhaps this was somehow meant to be. Perhaps it serves a higher purpose. Only…

He pictured Bella with snow cold skin and blood red eyes, and then flinched away from the image.

Yes. *Only*. Indeed. Because how could there be any good in destroying something so pure and lovely?

I glowered into the night, all the joy of the evening destroyed by his thoughts.

Edward deserves happiness. He's owed *it.* The fierceness of Carlisle's thoughts surprised me. *There must be a way.*

I wished I could believe that—either one. But there was no higher purpose to what was happening to Bella. Just a vicious harpy, an ugly, bitter fate who could not bear for Bella to have the life she deserved.

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I did not linger in Port Angeles. I took Carlisle to the dive where the creature named Lonnie was drowning his disappointment with his friends—two of whom had already passed out. Carlisle could see how hard it was for me to be so close—for me to hear the monster's thoughts and see his memories, memories of Bella mixed in with less fortunate girls who no one could save now.

My breathing sped. I clenched the steering wheel.

Go, Edward, he told me gently. *I'll make the rest of them safe. You go back to Bella.*

It was exactly the right thing to say. Her name was the only distraction that could mean anything to me now.

I left him in the car, and ran back to Forks in a straight line through the sleeping forest. It took less time than the first journey in the speeding car. It was just minutes later that I scaled the side of her house and slid her window out of my way.

I sighed silently with relief. Everything was just as it should be. Bella was safe in her bed, dreaming, her wet hair tangled like seaweed across the pillow.

But, unlike most nights, she was curled into a small ball with the covers stretched taut around her shoulders. Cold, I guessed. Before I could settle into my usual seat, she shivered in her sleep, and her lips trembled.

I thought for a brief moment, and then I eased out into the hallway, exploring another part of her house for the first time.

Charlie's snores were loud and even. I could almost catch the edge of his dream. Something with the rush of water and patient expectation…fishing, maybe?

There, at the top of the stairs, was a promising looking cupboard. I opened it hopefully, and found what I was looking for. I selected the thickest blanket from the tiny linen closet, and took it back into her room. I would return it before she woke, and no one would be the wiser.

Holding my breath, I cautiously spread the blanket over her; she didn't react to the added weight. I returned to the rocking chair.

While I waited anxiously for her to warm up, I thought of Carlisle, wondering where he was now. I knew his plan would go smoothly—Alice had seen that.

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Thinking of my father made me sigh—Carlisle gave me too much credit. I wished I was the person he thought me to be. That person, the one who deserved happiness, might hope to be worthy of this sleeping girl. How different things would be if I could be that Edward.

As I pondered this, a strange, uncalled image filled my head.

For one moment, the hag-faced fate I'd imagined, the one who sought Bella's destruction, was replaced by the most foolish and reckless of angels. A guardian angel—something Carlisle's version of me might have had. With a heedless smile on her lips, her sky-colored eyes full of mischief, the angel formed Bella in such a fashion that there was no way that I could possibly overlook her. A ridiculously potent scent to demand my attention, a silent mind to enflame my curiosity, a quiet beauty to hold my eyes, a selfless soul to earn my awe. Leave out the natural sense of self-preservation—so that Bella could bear to be near me—and, finally, add a wide streak of appallingly bad luck.

With a careless laugh, the irresponsible angel propelled her fragile creation directly into my path, trusting blithely in my flawed morality to keep Bella alive.

In this vision, I was not Bella's sentence; she was my reward.

I shook my head at the fantasy of the unthinking angel. She was not much better than the harpy. I could not think well of a higher power that would behave in such a dangerous and stupid manner. At least the ugly fate I could fight against.

And I had no angel. They were reserved for the good—for people like Bella. So where was her angel through all this? Who was watching over her?

I laughed silently, startled, as I realized that, just now, I was filling that role.

A vampire angel—there was a stretch.

After about a half hour, Bella relaxed out of the tight ball. Her breathing got deeper and she started to murmur. I smiled, satisfied. It was a small thing, but at least she was sleeping more comfortably tonight because I was here.

"Edward," she sighed, and she smiled, too.

I shoved tragedy aside for the moment, and let myself be happy again.

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11. Interrogations

CNN broke the story first.

I was glad it hit the news before I had to leave for school, anxious to hear how the humans would phrase the account, and what amount of attention it would garner. Luckily, it was a heavy news day. There was an earthquake in South America and a political kidnapping in the Middle East. So it ended up only earning a few seconds, a few sentences, and one grainy picture.

"Alonzo Calderas Wallace, suspected serial rapist and murderer wanted in the states of Texas and Oklahoma, was apprehended last night in Portland, Oregon thanks to an anonymous tip. Wallace was found unconscious in an alley early this morning, just a few yards from a police station. Officials are unable to tell us at this time whether he will be extradited to Houston or Oklahoma City to stand trial."

The picture was unclear, a mug shot, and he'd had a thick beard at the time of the photograph. Even if Bella saw it, she would probably not recognize him. I hoped she wouldn't; it would make her afraid needlessly.

"The coverage here in town will be light. It's too far away to be considered of local interest," Alice told me. "It was a good call to have Carlisle take him out of state."

I nodded. Bella didn't watch much TV regardless, and I'd never seen her father watching anything besides sports channels.

I'd done what I could. This monster no longer hunted, and I was not a murderer. Not recently, anyway. I'd been right to trust Carlisle, as much as I still wished the monster had not gotten off quite so easily. I caught myself hoping he would be extradited to Texas, where the death penalty was so popular…

No. That didn't matter. I would put this behind me, and concentrate on what was most important.

I'd left Bella's room less than an hour ago. I was already aching to see her again.

"Alice, do you mind—"

She cut me off. "Rosalie will drive. She'll act pissed, but you know she'll enjoy the excuse to show off her car." Alice trilled a laugh.

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I grinned at her. "See you at school."

Alice sighed, and my grin became a grimace.

I know, I know, she thought. *Not yet. I'll wait until you're ready for Bella to know me. You should know, though, this isn't just me being selfish. Bella's going to like me, too.*

I didn't answer her as I hurried out the door. That was a different way of viewing the situation. Would Bella *want* to know Alice? To have a vampire for a girlfriend?

Knowing Bella…that idea probably wouldn't bother her in the slightest.

I frowned to myself. What Bella wanted and what was best for Bella were two very separate things.

I started to feel uneasy as I parked my car in Bella's driveway. The human adage said that things looked different in the morning—that things changed when you slept on them. Would I look different to Bella in the weak light of a foggy day? More sinister or less sinister than I had in the blackness of night? Had the truth sunk in while she slept? Would she finally be afraid?

Her dreams had been peaceful, though, last night. When she'd spoken my name, time and time again, she'd smiled. More than once she'd murmured a plea for me to stay. Would that mean nothing today?

I waited nervously, listening to the sounds of her inside the house—the fast, stumbling footsteps on the stairs, the sharp rip of a foil wrapper, the contents of the refrigerator crashing against each other when the door slammed. It sounded like she was in a hurry. Anxious to get to school? The thought made me smile, hopeful again.

I looked at the clock. I supposed that—taking in account the velocity her decrepit truck must limit her to—she *was* running a little late.

Bella rushed out of the house, her book bag sliding off her shoulder, her hair coiled into a messy twist that was already coming apart on the nape of her neck. The thick green sweater she wore was not enough to keep her thin shoulders from hunching against the cold fog.

The long sweater was too big for her, unflattering. It masked her slender figure, turning all her delicate curves and soft lines into a shapeless jumble. I appreciated this almost as much as I wished that she had worn something more like the soft blue blouse

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she'd worn last night…the fabric had clung to her skin in such an appealing way, cut low enough to reveal the mesmerizing way her collar bones curled away from the hollow beneath her throat. The blue had flowed like water along the subtle shape of her body…

It was better—essential—that I kept my thoughts far, far away from that shape, so I was grateful to the unbecoming sweater she wore. I couldn't afford to make mistakes, and it would be a monumental mistake to dwell on the strange hungers that thoughts of her lips…her skin…her body…were shaking loose inside of me. Hungers that had evaded me for a hundred years. But I could not allow myself to think of touching her, because that was impossible.

I would break her.

Bella turned away from the door, in such a hurry that she nearly ran right by my car without noticing it.

Then she skidded to a stop, her knees locking like a startled colt's. Her bag slid further down her arm, and her eyes flew wide as they focused on the car.

I got out, taking no care to move at human speed, and opened the passenger door for her. I would not try to deceive her anymore—when we were alone, at least, I would be myself.

She looked up at me, startled again as I seemingly materialized out of the fog. And then the surprise in her eyes changed to something else, and I was no longer afraid—or hopeful—that her feelings for me had changed in the course of the night. Warmth, wonder, fascination, all swimming in the melted chocolate of her eyes.

"Do you want to ride with me today?" I asked. Unlike dinner last night, I would let her choose. From now on, it must always be her choice.

"Yes, thank you," she murmured, climbing into my car without hesitation.

Would it ever cease to thrill me, that I was the one she was saying yes to? I doubted it.

I flashed around the car, eager to join her. She showed no sign of being shocked by my sudden reappearance.

The happiness I felt when she sat beside me this way had no precedent. As much as I enjoyed the love and companionship of my family, despite the various entertainments and distractions the world had to offer, I had never been happy like this. Even knowing

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that it was wrong, that this couldn't possibly end well, could not keep the smile from my face for long.

My jacket was folded over the headrest of her seat. I saw her eyeing it.

"I brought the jacket for you," I told her. This was my excuse, had I needed to provide one, for showing up uninvited this morning. It was cold. She had no jacket. Surely this was an acceptable form of chivalry. "I didn't want you to get sick or something."

"I'm not quite that delicate," she said, staring at my chest rather than my face, as if she were hesitant to meet my eyes. But she put the coat on before I had to resort to commanding or coaxing.

"Aren't you?" I muttered to myself.

She stared out at the road as I accelerated toward the school. I could only stand the silence for a few seconds. I had to know what her thoughts were this morning. So much had changed between us since the last time the sun was up.

"What, no twenty questions today?" I asked, keeping it light again.

She smiled, seeming glad that I'd broached the subject. "Do my questions bother you?"

"Not as much as your reactions do," I told her honestly, smiling in response to her smile.

Her mouth turned down. "Do I react badly?"

"No, that's the problem. You take everything so coolly—it's unnatural." Not one scream so far. How could that be? "It makes me wonder what you're really thinking." Of course, everything she did or didn't do made me wonder that.

"I always tell you what I'm really thinking."

"You edit."

Her teeth pressed into her lip again. She didn't seem to notice when she did this—it was an unconscious response to tension. "Not very much."

Just those words were enough to have my curiosity raging. What did she purposefully keep from me?

"Enough to drive me insane," I said.

She hesitated, and then whispered, "You don't want to hear it."

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I had to think for a moment, run through our entire conversation last night, word for word, before I made the connection. Perhaps it took so much concentration because I couldn't imagine anything that I wouldn't want her to say to me. And then—because the tone of her voice was the same as last night; there was suddenly pain there again—I remembered. Once, I had asked her not to speak her thoughts. *Never say that*, I'd all but snarled at her. I had made her cry…

Was this what she kept from me? The depth of her feelings about me? That my being a monster didn't matter to her, and that she thought it was too late for her to change her mind?

I was unable to speak, because the joy and pain were too strong for words, the conflict between them too wild to allow for a coherent response. It was silent in the car except for the steady rhythms of her heart and lungs.

"Where's the rest of your family?" she asked suddenly.

I took a deep breath—registering the scent in the car with true pain for the first time; I was getting used to this, I realized with satisfaction—and forced myself to be casual again.

"They took Rosalie's car." I parked in the open spot next to the car in question. I hid my smile as I watched her eyes widen. "Ostentatious, isn't it?"

"Um, wow. If she has *that*, why does she ride with you?"

Rosalie would have enjoyed Bella's reaction…if she were being objective about Bella, which probably wouldn't happen.

"Like I said, it's ostentatious. We *try* to blend in."

"You don't succeed," she told me, and then she laughed a carefree laugh.

The blithe, wholly untroubled sound of her laughter warmed my hollow chest even as it made my head swim with doubt.

"So why did Rosalie drive today if it's more conspicuous?" she wondered.

"Hadn't you noticed? I'm breaking *all* the rules now."

My answer should have been mildly frightening—so, of course, Bella smiled at it.

She didn't wait for me to open her door, just like last night. I had to feign normality here at school—so I couldn't move fast enough to prevent this—but she was just going to have to get used to being treated with more courtesy, and get used to it soon.

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I walked as close to her as I dared, watching carefully for any sign that my proximity upset her. Twice her hand twitched toward me and then she would snatch it back. It *looked* like she wanted to touch me… My breath sped.

"Why do you have cars like that at all? If you're looking for privacy?" she asked as we walked.

"An indulgence," I admitted. "We all like to drive fast."

"Figures," she mumbled, her tone sour.

She didn't look up to see my answering grin.

Nuh-uh! I don't believe *this! How the hell did Bella pull this off? I don't get it! Why?*

Jessica's mental boggling interrupted my thoughts. She was waiting for Bella, taking refuge from the rain under the edge of the cafeteria's roof, with Bella's winter jacket over her arm. Her eyes were wide with disbelief.

Bella noticed her, too, in the next moment. A faint pink touched her cheek when Bella registered Jessica's expression. The thoughts in Jessica's head *were* fairly clear on her face.

"Hey, Jessica. Thanks for remembering," Bella greeted her. She reached out for the jacket and Jessica handed it to her wordlessly.

I should be polite to Bella's friends, whether they were good friends or not. "Good morning, Jessica."

Whoa…

Jessica's eyes popped even wider. It was strange and amusing…and, honestly, a bit embarrassing…to realize how much being near Bella had softened me. It seemed like no one was afraid of me any more. If Emmett found out about this, he would be laughing for the next century.

"Er…hi," Jessica mumbled, and her eyes flashed to Bella's face, full of significance. "I guess I'll see you in Trig."

You are so going to spill. I'm not taking no for an answer. Details. I have to have details! Edward freaking CULLEN!! Life is so unfair.

Bella's mouth twitched. "Yeah, I'll see you then."

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Jessica's thoughts ran wild as she hurried to her first class, peeking back at us now and then.

The whole story. I'm not accepting anything less. Did they plan to meet up last night? Are they dating? How long? How could she keep this a secret? Why would she want *to? It can't be a casual thing—she has to be seriously into him. Is there any other option? I* will *find out. I can't stand not knowing. I wonder if she's made out with him? Oh, swoon…* Jessica's thoughts were suddenly disjointed, and she let wordless fantasies swirl through her head. I winced at her speculations, and not just because she'd replaced Bella with herself in the mental pictures.

It couldn't be like that. And yet I…I wanted…

I resisted making the admission, even to myself. How many wrong ways would I want Bella in? Which one would end up killing her?

I shook my head, and tried to lighten up.

"What are you going to tell her?" I asked Bella.

"Hey!" she whispered fiercely. "I thought you couldn't read my mind!"

"I can't." I stared at her, surprised, trying to make sense of her words. Ah—we must have been thinking the same thing at the same time. Hmm…I rather liked that. "However," I told her, "I can read hers—she'll be waiting to ambush you in class."

Bella groaned, and then let the jacket slide off her shoulders. I didn't realize that she was giving it back at first—I wouldn't have asked for it; I would rather she kept it…a token—so I was too slow to offer her my help. She handed me the jacket, and put her arms through her own, without looking up to see that my hands were extended to assist. I frowned at that, and then controlled my expression before she noticed it.

"So, what are you going to tell her?" I pressed.

"A little help? What does she want to know?"

I smiled, and shook my head. I wanted to hear what she was thinking without a prompt. "That's not fair."

Her eyes tightened. "No, you not sharing what you know—now that's unfair."

Right—she didn't like double standards.

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We got to the door of her class—where I would have to leave her; I wondered idly if Ms. Cope would be more accommodating about a switch in the schedule of my English class… I made myself focus. I could be fair.

"She wants to know if we're secretly dating," I said slowly. "And she wants to know how you feel about me."

Her eyes were wide—not startled, but ingenious now. They were open to me, readable. She was playing innocent.

"Yikes," she murmured. "What should I say?"

"Hmmm." She always tried to make me give away more than she did. I pondered how to respond.

A wayward strand of her hair, slightly damp from the fog, draped across her shoulder and curled around where her collar bone was hidden by the ridiculous sweater. It drew my eyes…pulled them across the other hidden lines…

I reached for it carefully, not touching her skin—the morning was chill enough without my touch—and twisted it back into place in her untidy bun so that it wouldn't distract me again. I remembered when Mike Newton had touched her hair, and my jaw flexed at the memory. She had flinched away from him then. Her reaction now was nothing the same; instead, there was a slight widening of her eyes, a rush of blood under her skin, and a sudden, uneven thumping of her heart.

I tried to hide my smile as I answered her question.

"I suppose you could say yes to the first…if you don't mind—," her choice, always her choice, "—it's easier than any other explanation."

"I don't mind," she whispered. Her heart had not found its normal rhythm yet.

"And as for her other question…" I couldn't hide my smile now. "Well, I'll be listening to hear the answer to that one myself."

Let Bella consider *that*. I held back my laugh as shock crossed her face.

I turned quickly, before she could ask for any more answers. I had a difficult time not giving her whatever she asked for. And I wanted to hear *her* thoughts, not mine.

"I'll see you at lunch," I called back to her over my shoulder, an excuse to check that she was still staring after me, wide-eyed. Her mouth was hanging open. I turned away again, and laughed.

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As I paced away, I was vaguely aware of the shocked and speculative thoughts that swirled around me—eyes bouncing back and forth between Bella's face and my retreating figure. I paid them little attention. I couldn't concentrate. It was hard enough to keep my feet moving at an acceptable speed as I crossed the soggy grass to my next class. I wanted to run—really run, so fast that I would disappear, so fast that it would feel like I was flying. Part of me was flying already.

I put the jacket on when I got to class, letting her fragrance swim thick around me. I would burn now—let the scent desensitize me—and then it would be easier to ignore it later, when I was with her again at lunch…

It was a good thing that my teachers no longer bothered to call on me. Today might have been the day that they would have caught me out, unprepared and answerless. My mind was in so many places this morning; only my body was in the classroom.

Of course I was watching Bella. That was becoming natural—as automatic as breathing. I heard her conversation with a demoralized Mike Newton. She quickly directed the conversation to Jessica, and I grinned so wide that Rob Sawyer, who sat at the desk to my right, flinched visibly and slid deeper into his seat, away from me.

Ugh. Creepy.

Well, I hadn't lost it entirely.

I was also monitoring Jessica loosely, watching her refine her questions for Bella. I could barely wait for fourth period, ten times as eager and anxious as the curious human girl who wanted fresh gossip.

And I was also listening to Angela Weber.

I had not forgotten the gratitude I felt to her—for thinking nothing but kind things toward Bella in the first place, and then for her help last night. So I waited through the morning, looking for something that she wanted. I assumed it would be an easy; like any other human, there must be some bauble or toy she wanted particularly. Several, probably. I would deliver something anonymously and call us even.

But Angela proved almost as unaccommodating as Bella with her thoughts. She was oddly content for a teenager. Happy. Perhaps this was the reason for her unusual kindness—she was one of those rare people who had what they wanted and wanted what they had. If she wasn't paying attention to her teachers and her notes, she was thinking

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of the twin little brothers she was taking to the beach this weekend—anticipating their excitement with an almost maternal pleasure. She cared for them often, but was not resentful of this fact… It was very sweet.

But not really helpful to me.

There had to be something she wanted. I would just have to keep looking. But later. It was time for Bella's trig class with Jessica.

I wasn't watching where I was going as I made my way to English. Jessica was already in her seat, both her feet tapping impatiently against the floor as she waited for Bella to arrive.

Conversely, once I settled into my assigned seat in the classroom, I became utterly still. I had to remind myself to fidget now and then. To keep up the charade. It was difficult, my thoughts were so focused on Jessica's. I hoped she would pay attention, really try to read Bella's face for me.

Jessica's tapping intensified when Bella walked into the room.

She looks…glum. Why? Maybe there's nothing going on with Edward Cullen. That would be a disappointment. Except…then he's still available… If he's suddenly interested in dating, I don't mind helping out with that…

Bella's face didn't look glum, it looked reluctant. She was worried—she knew I would hear all of this. I smiled to myself.

"Tell me everything!" Jess demanded while Bella was still removing her jacket to hang it on the back of her seat. She was moving with deliberation, unwilling.

Ugh, she's so slow. Let's get to the juicy stuff!

"What do you want to know?" Bella stalled as she took her seat.

"What happened last night?"

"He bought me dinner, and then he drove me home."

And then? C'mon, there has to be more than that! She's lying anyway, I know that. I'm going to call her on it.

"How did you get home so fast?"

I watched Bella roll her eyes at the suspicious Jessica.

"He drives like a maniac. It was terrifying."

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She smiled a tiny smile, and I laughed out loud, interrupting Mr. Mason's announcements. I tried to turn the laugh into a cough, but no one was fooled. Mr. Mason shot me an irritated look, but I didn't even bother to listen to the thought behind it. I was hearing Jessica.

Huh. She sounds like she's telling the truth. Why is she making me pull this out of her, word by word? I would be bragging at the top of my lungs if it were me.

"Was it like a date—did you tell him to meet you there?"

Jessica watched surprise cross Bella's expression, and was disappointed at how genuine it seemed.

"No—I was very *surprised to see him there,"* Bella told her.

What is going on?? "But he picked you up for school today?" There has to be more to the story.

"Yes—that was a surprise, too. He noticed I didn't have a jacket last night."

That's not very much fun, Jessica thought, disappointed again.

I was tired of her line of questioning—I wanted to hear something I didn't already know. I hoped she wasn't so dissatisfied that she would skip the questions I was waiting for.

"So are you going out again?" Jessica demanded.

"He offered to drive me to Seattle Saturday because he thinks my truck isn't up to it—does that count?"

Hmm. He sure is going out of his way to…well, take care of her, sort of. There must be something there on his side, if not on hers. How could THAT be? Bella's crazy.

"Yes," Jessica answered Bella's question.

"Well, then," Bella concluded. *"Yes."*

"Wow…Edward Cullen." Whether she likes him or not, this is major.

"I know," Bella sighed.

The tone of her voice encouraged Jessica. *Finally—she sounds like she gets it! She must realize…*

"Wait!" Jessica said, suddenly remembering her most vital question. *"Has he kissed you?" Please say yes. And then describe every second!*

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"No," Bella mumbled, and then she looked down at her hands, her face falling. *"It's not like that."*

Damn. I wish… Ha. Looks like she does to.

I frowned. Bella did look upset about something, but it couldn't be disappointment like Jessica assumed. She couldn't want that. Not knowing what she knew. She couldn't want to be that close to my *teeth*. For all she knew, I had fangs.

I shuddered.

"Do you think Saturday…?" Jessica prodded.

Bella looked even more frustrated as she said, *"I really doubt it."*

Yeah, she does wish. That sucks for her.

Was it because I was watching all this through the filter of Jessica's perceptions that it seemed like Jessica was right?

For a half-second I was distracted by the idea, the impossibility, of what it would be like to try to kiss her. My lips to her lips, cold stone to warm, yielding silk…

And then she dies.

I shook my head, wincing, and made myself pay attention.

"What did you talk about?" Did *you talk to him, or did you make him drag every ounce of information out of you like this?*

I smiled ruefully. Jessica wasn't far off.

"I don't know, Jess, lots of stuff. We talked about the English essay a little."

A very little. I smiled wider.

Oh, c'MON. "Please, Bella! Give me some details."

Bella deliberated for a moment.

"Well…okay, I've got one. You should have seen the waitress flirting with him—it was over the top. But he didn't pay any attention to her at all."

What a strange detail to share. I was surprised Bella had even noticed. It seemed a very inconsequential thing.

Interesting… "That's a good sign. Was she pretty?"

Hmm. Jessica thought more of it that I did. Must be a female thing.

"Very," Bella told her. *"And probably nineteen or twenty."*

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Jessica was momentarily distracted by a memory of Mike on her date Monday night—Mike being a little too friendly with a waitress who Jessica did not consider pretty at all. She shoved the memory away and returned, stifling her irritation, to her quest for details.

"Even better. He must like you."

"I think *so,"* Bella said slowly, and I was on the edge of my seat, my body rigidly still. *"But it's hard to tell. He's always so cryptic."*

I must not have been as transparently obvious and out of control as I'd thought. Still…observant as she was… How could she not realize that I was in love with her? I sifted through our conversation, almost surprised that I hadn't said the words out loud. It had felt like that knowledge had been the subtext of every word between us.

Wow. How do you sit there across from a male model and make conversation? "I don't know how you're brave enough to be alone with him," Jessica said.

Shock flashed across Bella's face. *"Why?"*

Weird reaction. What does she think I meant? "He's so…" What's the right word? "Intimidating. I wouldn't know what to say to him." I couldn't even speak English to him today, and all he said was good morning. I must have sounded like such an idiot.

Bella smiled. *"I do have some trouble with incoherency when I'm around him."*

She must be trying to make Jessica feel better. She was almost unnaturally self-possessed when we were together.

"Oh well," Jessica sighed. *"He* is *unbelievably gorgeous."*

Bella's face was suddenly colder. Her eyes flashed the same way they did when she resented some injustice. Jessica didn't process the change in her expression.

"There's a lot more to him than that," Bella snapped.

Oooh. Now we're getting somewhere. "Really? Like what?"

Bella gnawed her lip for a moment. *"I can't explain it right,"* she finally said. *"But he's even more unbelievable* behind *the face."* She looked away from Jessica, her eyes slightly unfocused as if she was staring at something very far away.

The feeling I felt now was loosely similar to how it felt when Carlisle or Esme praised me beyond what I deserved. Similar, but more intense, more consuming.

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Sell stupid somewhere else—there's nothing *better than that face! Unless it's his body. Swoon. "Is that possible?"* Jessica giggled.

Bella didn't turn. She continued to stare into the distance, ignoring Jessica.

A normal person would be gloating. Maybe if I keep the questions simple. Ha ha. Like I'm talking to a kindergartener. "So you like him, then?"

I was rigid again.

Bella didn't look at Jessica. *"Yes."*

"I mean, do you really *like him?"*

"Yes."

Look at that blush!

I was.

"How much *do you like him?"* Jessica demanded.

The English room could have gone up in flames and I wouldn't have noticed.

Bella's face was bright red now—I could almost feel the heat from the mental picture.

"Too much," she whispered. *"More than he likes me. But I don't see how I can help that."*

Shoot! What did Mr. Varner just ask? "Um—which number, Mr. Varner?"

It was good that Jessica could no longer quiz Bella. I needed a minute.

What on earth was that girl thinking *now*? *More than he likes me*? How did she come up with *that*? *But I don't see how I can help that*? What was that supposed to mean? I couldn't fit a rational explanation to the words. They were practically senseless.

It seemed I couldn't take anything for granted. Obvious things, things that made perfect sense, somehow got twisted up and turned backwards in that bizarre brain of hers. *More than he likes me*? Maybe I shouldn't rule out the institution just yet.

I glared at the clock, gritting my teeth. How could mere minutes feel so impossibly long to an immortal? Where was my perspective?

My jaw was tight throughout Mr. Varner's entire trigonometry lesson. I heard more of that than the lecture in my own class. Bella and Jessica didn't speak again, but Jessica peeked at Bella several times, and once her face was brilliant scarlet again for no apparent reason.

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Lunch couldn't come fast enough.

I wasn't sure if Jessica would get some of the answers I was waiting for when the class was over, but Bella was quicker than she was.

As soon as the bell sounded, Bella turned to Jessica.

"In English, Mike asked me if you said anything about Monday night," Bella said, a smile pulling at the corners of her lips. I understood this for what is was—offence as the best defense.

Mike asked about me? Joy made Jessica's mind suddenly unguarded, softer, without its usual snide edge. *"You're kidding! What did you say?"*

"I told him you said you had a lot of fun—and he looked pleased."

"Tell me exactly what he said, and your exact answer!"

That was all I was going to get from Jessica today, clearly. Bella was smiling like she was thinking the same thing. Like she'd won the round.

Well, lunch would be another story. I would have better success with getting answers out of her than Jessica, I would make sure of that.

I could hardly bear to check in occasionally with Jessica through the fourth hour. I had no patience for her obsessive thoughts of Mike Newton. I'd had more than enough of him in the last two weeks. He was lucky to be alive.

I moved apathetically through gym class with Alice, the way we always moved when it came to physical activity with humans. She was my teammate, naturally. It was the first day of badminton. I sighed with boredom, swinging the racket in slow motion to tap the birdie back to the other side. Lauren Mallory was on the other team; she missed. Alice was twirling her racket like a baton, staring at the ceiling.

We all hated gym, Emmett especially. Throwing games was an affront to his personal philosophy. Gym seemed worse today than usual—I felt just as irritated as Emmett always did.

Before my head could explode with impatience, Coach Clapp called the games and sent us out early. I was ridiculously grateful that he'd skipped breakfast—a fresh attempt to diet—and the consequent hunger had him in a hurry to leave campus to find a greasy lunch somewhere. He promised himself he would start over tomorrow...

This gave me enough time to get to the math building before Bella's class ended.

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Enjoy yourself, Alice thought as she headed off to meet Jasper. *Just a few days more to be patient. I suppose you won't say hi to Bella for me, will you?*

I shook my head, exasperated. Were all psychics so smug?

FYI, it's going to be sunny on both sides of the sound this weekend. You might want to rearrange your plans.

I sighed as I continued in the opposite direction. Smug, but definitely useful.

I leaned against the wall by the door, waiting. I was close enough that I could hear Jessica's voice through the bricks as well as her thoughts.

"You're not sitting with us today, are you?" *She looks all…lit up. I bet there's tons she didn't tell me.*

"I don't *think* so," Bella answered, oddly unsure.

Hadn't I promised to spend lunch with her? What was she *thinking*?

They came out of the class together, and both girls' eyes widened when they saw me. But I could only hear Jessica.

Nice. Wow. Oh, yeah, there's more going on here than she's telling me. Maybe I'll call her tonight… Or maybe I shouldn't encourage her. Huh. I hope he moves past her in a hurry. Mike is cute but…wow.

"See you later, Bella."

Bella walked toward me, pausing a step away, still unsure. Her skin was pink across her cheekbones.

I knew her well enough now to be sure that there was no fear behind her hesitation. Apparently, this was about some gulf she imagined between her feelings and mine. *More than he likes me.* Absurd!

"Hello," I said, my voice a tad curt.

Her face got brighter. "Hi."

She didn't seem inclined to say anything else, so I led the way to the cafeteria and she walked silently beside me.

The jacket had worked—her scent was not the blow it usually was. It was just an intensification of the pain I already felt. I could ignore it more easily than I once would have believed possible.

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Bella was restless as we waited in line, toying absently with the zipper on her jacket and shifting nervously from foot to foot. She glanced at me often, but whenever she met my gaze, she looked down as if she were embarrassed. Was this because so many people were staring at us? Maybe she could hear the loud whispers—the gossip was verbal as well as mental today.

Or maybe she realized, from my expression, that she was in trouble.

She didn't say anything until I was assembling her lunch. I didn't know what she liked—not yet—so I grabbed one of everything.

"What are you doing?" she hissed in a low voice. "You're not getting all that for me?"

I shook my head, and shoved the tray up to the register. "Half is for me, of course."

She raised one eyebrow skeptically, but said nothing more as I paid for the food and escorted her to the table we'd sat at last week before her disastrous experience with blood typing. It seemed like much more than a few days. Everything was different now.

She sat across from me again. I pushed the tray toward her.

"Take whatever you want," I encouraged.

She picked up an apple and twisted it in her hands, a speculative look on her face.

"I'm curious."

What a surprise.

"What would you do if someone dared you to eat food?" she continued in a low voice that wouldn't carry to human ears. Immortal ears were another matter, if those ears were paying attention. I probably should have mentioned something to them earlier…

"You're always curious," I complained. Oh well. It wasn't like I hadn't had to eat before. It was part of the charade. An unpleasant part.

I reached for the closest thing, and held her eyes while I bite off a small bite of whatever it was. Without looking, I couldn't tell. It was as slimy and chunky and repulsive as any other human food. I chewed swiftly and swallowed, trying to keep the grimace off my face. The gob of food moved slowly and uncomfortably down my throat. I sighed as I thought of how I would have to choke it back up later. Disgusting.

Bella's expression was shocked. Impressed.

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I wanted to roll my eyes. Of course we would have perfected such deceptions.

"If someone dared you to eat dirt, you could, couldn't you?"

Her nose wrinkled and she smiled. "I did once…on a dare. It wasn't so bad."

I laughed. "I suppose I'm not surprised."

They look cozy, don't they? Good body language. I'll give Bella my take later. He's leaning toward her just the way he should, if he's interested. He looks interested. He looks…perfect. Jessica sighed. *Yum.*

I met Jessica's curious eyes, and she looked away nervously, giggling to the girl next to her.

Hmmm. Probably better to stick to Mike. Reality, not fantasy…

"Jessica's analyzing everything I do," I informed Bella. "She'll break it down for you later."

I pushed the plate of food back towards her—pizza, I realized—wondering how best to begin. My former frustration flared as the words repeated in my head: *More than he likes me. But I don't see how I can help that.*

She took a bite from the same slice of pizza. It amazed me how trusting she was. Of course, she didn't know I was poisonous—not that sharing food would hurt her. Still, I expected her to treat me differently. As something other. She never did—at least, not in a negative way…

I would start off gently.

"So the waitress was pretty, was she?"

She raised the eyebrow again. "You really didn't notice?"

As if any woman could hope to capture my attention from Bella. Absurd, again.

"No. I wasn't paying attention. I had a lot on my mind." Not the least of which had been the soft cling of her thin blouse…

Good thing she'd worn that ugly sweater today.

"Poor girl," Bella said, smiling.

She liked that I hadn't found the waitress interesting in any way. I could understand that. How many times had I imagined crippling Mike Newton in the biology room?

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She couldn't honestly believe that her human feelings, the fruition of seventeen short mortal years, could be stronger than the immortal passions that had been building up in me for a century.

"Something you said to Jessica…" I couldn't keep my voice casual. "Well, it bothers me."

She was immediately on the defensive. "I'm not surprised you heard something you didn't like. You know what they say about eavesdroppers."

Eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves, that was the saying.

"I warned you I would be listening," I reminded her.

"And I warned you that you didn't want to know everything I was thinking."

Ah, she was thinking of when I'd made her cry. Remorse made my voice thicker. "You did. You aren't precisely right, though. I do want to know what you're thinking—everything. I just wish…that you wouldn't be thinking some things."

More half-lies. I knew I *shouldn't* want her to care about me. But I did. Of course I did.

"That's quite a distinction," she grumbled, scowling at me.

"But that's not really the point at the moment."

"Then what is?"

She leaned toward me, her hand cupped lightly around her throat. It drew my eye—distracted me. How soft that skin must feel…

Focus, I commanded myself.

"Do you truly believe that you care more for me than I do for you?" I asked. The question sounded ridiculous to me, like the words were scrambled.

Her eyes were wide, her breathing stopped. Then she looked away, blinking quickly. Her breath came in a low gasp.

"You're doing it again," she murmured.

"What?"

"Dazzling me," she admitted, meeting my eyes warily.

"Oh." Hmm. I wasn't quite sure what to do about that. Nor was I sure that I didn't *want* to dazzle her. I was still thrilled that I *could*. But it wasn't helping the progression of the conversation.

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"It's not your fault." She sighed. "You can't help it."

"Are you going to answer my question?" I demanded.

She stared at the table. "Yes."

That was all she said.

"Yes, you are going to answer, or yes, you really think that?" I asked impatiently.

"Yes, I really think that," she said without looking up. There was a faint undertone of sadness in her voice. She blushed again, and her teeth moved unconsciously to worry her lip.

Abruptly, I realized that this was very hard for her to admit, because she truly believed it. And I was no better than that coward, Mike, asking for her to confirm her feelings before I'd confirmed my own. It didn't matter that I felt I'd make my side abundantly clear. It hadn't gotten through to her, and so I had no excuse.

"You're wrong," I promised. She must hear the tenderness in my voice.

Bella looked up to me, her eyes opaque, giving nothing away. "You can't know that," she whispered.

She thought that I was underestimating her feelings because I couldn't hear her thoughts. But, in truth, the problem was that she was underestimating *mine*.

"What makes you think so?" I wondered.

She stared back at me, the furrow between her brows, biting her lips. For the millionth time, I wished desperately that I could just *hear* her.

I was about to beg her to tell me what thought she was struggling with, but she held up a finger to keep me from speaking.

"Let me think," she requested.

As long as she was simply organizing her thoughts, I could be patient.

Or I could pretend to be.

She pressed her hands together, twining and untwining her slender fingers. She was watching her hands as if they belonged to someone else while she spoke.

"Well, aside from the obvious," she murmured. "Sometimes… I can't be sure—*I* don't know how to read minds—but sometimes it seems like you're trying to say goodbye when you're saying something else." She didn't look up.

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She'd caught that, had she? Did she realize that it was only weakness and selfishness that kept me here? Did she think less of me for that?

"Perceptive," I breathed, and then watched in horror as pain twisted her expression. I hurried to contradict her assumption. "That's exactly why you're wrong, though—" I began, and then I paused, remembering the first words of her explanation. They bothered me, though I wasn't sure I understood exactly. "What do you mean, 'the obvious'?"

"Well, look at me," she said.

I *was* looking. All I ever did was look at her. What did she mean?

"I'm absolutely ordinary," she explained. "Well, except for the bad things like all the near death experiences and being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled. And look at you." She fanned the air toward me, like she was making some point so obvious it wasn't worth spelling out.

She thought she was ordinary? She thought that I was somehow preferable to her? In whose estimation? Silly, narrow-minded, blind humans like Jessica or Ms. Cope? How could she not realize that she was the most beautiful…most exquisite… Those words weren't even enough.

And she had no idea.

"You don't see yourself very clearly, you know," I told her. "I'll admit you're dead-on about the bad things…" I laughed humorlessly. I did not find the evil fate who haunted her comical. The clumsiness, however, was sort of funny. Endearing. Would she believe me if I told her she was beautiful, inside and out? Perhaps she would find corroboration more persuasive. "But you didn't hear what every human male was thinking on your first day."

Ah, the hope, the thrill, the eagerness of those thoughts. The speed with which they'd turned to impossible fantasies. Impossible, because she wanted none of them.

I was the one she said yes to.

My smile must have been smug.

Her face was blank with surprise. "I don't believe it," she mumbled.

"Trust me just this once—you are the opposite of ordinary."

Her existence alone was excuse enough to justify the creation of the entire world.

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She wasn't used to compliments, I could see that. Another thing she would just *have* to get used to. She flushed, and changed the subject. "But I'm not saying goodbye."

"Don't you see? That's what proves me right. I care the most, because if I can do it…" Would I ever be unselfish enough to do the right thing? I shook my head in despair. I would have to find the strength. She deserved a life. Not what Alice had seen coming for her. "If leaving is the right thing to do…" And it had to be the right thing, didn't it? There was no reckless angel. Bella didn't belong with me. "Then I'll hurt myself to keep from hurting you, to keep you safe."

As I said the words, I willed them to be true.

She glared at me. Somehow, my words had angered her. "And you don't think I would do the same?" she demanded furiously.

So furious—so soft and so fragile. How could she ever hurt anyone? "You'd never have to make the choice," I told her, depressed anew by the wide difference between us.

She stared at me, concern replacing the anger in her eyes and bringing out the little pucker between them.

There was something truly wrong with the order of the universe if someone so good and so breakable did not merit a guardian angel to keep her out of trouble.

Well, I thought with dark humor, *at least she has a guardian vampire.*

I smiled. How I loved my excuse to stay. "Of course, keeping you safe is beginning to feel like a full-time occupation that requires my constant presence."

She smiled, too. "No one has tried to do away with me today," she said lightly, and then her face turned speculative for half a second before her eyes went opaque again.

"Yet," I added dryly.

"Yet," she agreed to my surprise. I'd expected her to deny any need for protection.

How could he? That selfish jackass! How could he do this to us? Rosalie's piercing mental shriek broke through my concentration.

"Easy, Rose," I heard Emmett whisper from across the cafeteria. His arm was around her shoulders, holding her tight into his side—restraining her.

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Sorry, Edward, Alice thought guiltily. *She could tell Bella knew too much from your conversation…and, well, it would have been worse if I hadn't told her the truth right away. Trust me on that.*

I winced at the mental picture that followed, at what would have happened if I'd told Rosalie that Bella knew I was a vampire at home, where Rosalie didn't have a façade to keep up. I'd have to hide my Aston Martin somewhere out of state if she didn't calm down by the time school was over. The sight of my favorite car, mangled and burning, was upsetting—though I knew I'd earned the retribution.

Jasper was not much happier.

I'd deal with the others later. I only had so much time allotted to be to be with Bella, and I wasn't going to waste it. And hearing Alice had reminded me that I had some business to attend to.

"I have another question for you," I said, tuning out Rosalie's mental hysterics.

"Shoot," Bella said, smiling.

"Do you really need to go to Seattle this Saturday, or was that just an excuse to get out of saying no to all your admirers?"

She grimaced at me. "You know, I haven't forgiven you for the Tyler thing yet. It's your fault that he's deluded himself into thinking I'm going to prom with him."

"Oh, he would have found a chance to ask you without me—I just really wanted to watch your face."

I laughed now, remembering her aghast expression. Nothing I'd ever told her about my own dark story had ever made her look so horrified. The truth didn't frighten her. She wanted to be with me. Mind-boggling.

"If I'd asked you, would you have turned *me* down?"

"Probably not," she said. "But I would have cancelled later—faked an illness or a sprained ankle."

How strange. "Why would you do that?"

She shook her head, as if she was disappointed that I did not understand at once. "You've never seen me in gym, I guess, but I would have thought that you would understand."

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Ah. "Are you referring to the fact that you can't walk across a flat, stable surface without finding something to trip over?"

"Obviously."

"That wouldn't be a problem. It's all in the leading."

For a brief fraction of a second, I was overwhelmed by the idea of holding her in my arms at a dance—where she would surely wear something pretty and delicate rather than this hideous sweater.

With perfect clarity, I remembered how her body had felt under mine after I'd thrown her out of the way of the oncoming van. Stronger than the panic or the desperation or the chagrin, I could remember that sensation. She'd been so warm and so soft, fitting easily into my own stone shape…

I wrenched myself back from the memory.

"But you never told me—" I said quickly, preventing her from arguing with me about her clumsiness, as she clearly intended to do. "Are you resolved on going to Seattle, or do you mind if we do something different?"

Devious—giving her a choice without giving her the option of getting away from me for the day. Hardly fair of me. But I had made her a promise last night…and I liked the idea of fulfilling it—almost as much as that idea terrified me.

The sun would be shining Saturday. I could show her the real me, if I was brave enough to endure her horror and disgust. I knew just the place to take such a risk…

"I'm open to alternatives," Bella said. "But I do have a favor to ask."

A qualified yes. What would she want from me?

"What?"

"Can I drive?"

Was this her idea of humor? "Why?"

"Well, mostly because when I told Charlie I was going to Seattle, he specifically asked if I was going alone and, at the time, I was. If he asked again, I probably wouldn't lie, but I don't think he *will* ask again, and leaving my truck at home would just bring up the subject unnecessarily. And also, because your driving frightens me."

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I rolled my eyes at her. "Of all the things about me that could frighten you, you worry about my driving." Truly, her brain worked backwards. I shook my head, disgusted.

Edward, Alice called urgently.

Suddenly I was staring into a bright circle of sunlight, caught up in one of Alice's visions.

It was a place I knew well, the place I'd just considered taking Bella—a little meadow where no one ever went beside myself. A quiet, pretty place where I could count on being alone—far enough from any trail or human habitation that even my mind could have peace and quiet.

Alice recognized it, too, because she had seen me there not so long ago in another vision—one of those flickering, indistinct visions that Alice had shown me the morning I'd saved Bella from the van.

In that flickering vision, I hadn't been alone. And now it was clear—Bella was with me there. So I *was* brave enough. She stared at me, rainbows dancing across her face, her eyes fathomless.

It's the same place, Alice thought, her mind full of a horror that did not match the vision. Tension, perhaps, but horror? What did she mean, *the same place*?

And then I saw it.

Edward! Alice protested shrilly. *I love her, Edward!*

I shut her out viciously.

She didn't love Bella the way I did. Her vision was impossible. Wrong. She was blinded somehow, seeing impossibilities.

Not even a half a second had passed. Bella was looking curiously at my face, waiting for me to approve her request. Had she seen the flash of dread, or had it been too quick for her?

I focused on her, on our unfinished conversation, pushing Alice and her flawed, lying visions far from my thoughts. They didn't deserve my attention.

I wasn't able to keep up the playful tone of our banter, though.

"Won't you want to tell your father that you're spending the day with me?" I asked, darkness seeping into my voice.

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I shoved at the visions again, trying to push them farther away, to keep them from flickering through my head.

"With Charlie, less is always more," Bella said, certain of this fact. "Where are we going, anyway?"

Alice was wrong. Dead wrong. There was no chance of that. And it was just an old vision, invalid now. Things had changed.

"The weather will be nice," I told her slowly, fighting the panic and indecision. Alice was wrong. I would continue as if I hadn't heard or seen anything. "So I'll be staying out of the public eye…and you can stay with me, if you'd like to."

Bella caught the significance at once; her eyes were bright and eager. "And you'll show me what you meant, about the sun?"

Maybe, like so many times before, her reaction would be the opposite of what I expected. I smiled at that possibility, struggling to return to the lighter moment. "Yes. But…" She hadn't said yes. "If you don't want to be…alone with me, I'd still rather you didn't go to Seattle by yourself. I shudder to think of the trouble you could find in a city that size."

Her lips pressed together; she was offended.

"Phoenix is three times bigger than Seattle—just in population. In physical size—"

"But apparently your number wasn't up in Phoenix," I said, cutting off her justifications. "So I'd rather you stayed with me."

She could stay forever and it would not be long enough.

I shouldn't think that way. We didn't have forever. The passing seconds counted more than they ever had before; each second changed her while I remained untouched.

"As it happens, I don't mind being alone with you," she said.

No—because her instincts were backwards.

"I know." I sighed. "You should tell Charlie, though."

"Why in the world would I do that?" she asked, sounding horrified.

I glared at her, the visions I couldn't quite manage to repress swirling sickeningly through my head.

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"To give me some small incentive to bring you back," I hissed. She should give me that much—one witness to compel me to be cautious.

Why had Alice forced this knowledge on me now?

Bella swallowed loudly, and stared at me for a long moment. What did she see?

"I think I'll take my chances," she said.

Ugh! Did she get some thrill out of risking her life? Some shot of adrenaline she craved?

I scowled at Alice, who met my glare with a warning glance. Beside her, Rosalie was glowering furiously, but I couldn't have cared less. Let her destroy the car. It was just a toy.

"Let's talk about something else," Bella suggested suddenly.

I looked back at her, wondering how she could be so oblivious to what really mattered. Why wouldn't she see me for the monster I was?

"What do you want to talk about?"

Her eyes darted to the left and then the right, as if checking to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. She must be planning to introduce another myth-related topic. Her eyes froze for a second and her body stiffened, and then she looked back to me.

"Why did you go to that Goat Rocks place last weekend…to hunt? Charlie said it wasn't a good place to hike, because of bears."

So oblivious. I stared at her, raising one eyebrow.

"Bears?" she gasped.

I smiled wryly, watching that sink in. Would this make her take me seriously? Would anything?

She pulled her expression together. "You know, bears are not in season," she said severely, narrowing her eyes.

"If you read carefully, the laws only cover hunting with weapons."

She lost control over her face again for a moment. Her lips fell open.

"Bears?" she said again, a tentative question this time rather than a gasp of shock.

"Grizzly is Emmett's favorite."

I watched her eyes, seeing this settle in.

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"Hmm," she murmured. She took a bite of the pizza, looking down. She chewed thoughtfully, and then took a drink.

"So," she said, finally looking up. "What's your favorite?"

I supposed I should have expected something like that, but I hadn't. Bella was always interesting, at the very least.

"Mountain lion," I answered brusquely.

"Ah," she said in a neutral tone. Her heartbeat continued steady and even, as if we were discussing a favorite restaurant.

Fine, then. If she wanted to act like this was nothing unusual…

"Of course, we have to be careful not to impact the environment with injudicious hunting," I told her, my voice detached and clinical. "We try to focus on areas with an overpopulation of predators—ranging as far away as we need. There's always plenty of deer and elk here, and they'll do, but where's the fun in that?"

She listened with a politely interested expression, as if I were a teacher giving a lecture. I had to smile.

"Where indeed," she murmured calmly, taking another bite of pizza.

"Early spring is Emmett's favorite bear season," I said, continuing with the lecture. "They're just coming out of hibernation, so they're more irritable."

Seventy years later, and he still hadn't gotten over losing that first match.

"Nothing more fun than an irritated grizzly bear," Bella agreed, nodding solemnly.

I couldn't hold back a chuckle as I shook my head at her illogical calm. It had to be put on. "Tell me what you're really thinking, please."

"I'm trying to picture it—but I can't," she said, the crease appearing between her eyes. "How to you hunt a bear without weapons?"

"Oh, we have weapons," I told her, and then flashed her a wide smile. I expected her to recoil, but she was very still, watching me. "Just not the kind they consider when writing hunting laws. If you've ever seen a bear attack on television, you should be able to visualize Emmett hunting."

She glanced toward the table where the others sat, and shuddered.

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Finally. And then I laughed at myself, because I knew part of me was wishing she would stay oblivious.

Her dark eyes were wide and deep as she stared at me now. "Are you like a bear, too?" she asked in an almost-whisper.

"More like the lion, or so they tell me," I told her, striving to sound detached again. "Perhaps our preferences are indicative."

Her lips pulled up a tiny bit at the corners. "Perhaps," she repeated. And then her head leaned to the side, and curiosity was suddenly clear in her eyes. "Is that something I might get to see?"

I didn't need pictures from Alice to illustrate this horror—my imagination was quite enough.

"Absolutely not," I snarled at her.

She jerked away from me, her eyes bewildered and frightened.

I leaned back, too, wanting to put space between us. She was never going to see, was she? She wouldn't do one thing to help me keep her alive.

"Too scary for me?" she asked, her voice even. Her heart, however, was still moving in double time.

"If that were it, I would take you out tonight," I retorted through my teeth. "You *need* a healthy dose of fear. Nothing could be more beneficial for you."

"Then why?" she demanded, undeterred.

I glared at her blackly, waiting for her to be afraid. *I* was afraid. I could imagine only too clearly having Bella near when I hunted…

Her eyes remained curious, impatient, nothing more. She waited for her answer, not giving in.

But our hour was up.

"Later," I snapped, and I rose to my feet. "We're going to be late."

She looked around herself, disoriented, like she'd forgotten we were at lunch. Like she'd forgotten we were even at school—surprised that we were not alone in some private place. I understood that feeling exactly. It was hard to remember the rest of the world when I was with her.

She got up quickly, bobbling once, and threw her bag over her shoulder.

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"Later, then," she said, and I could see the determination in the set of her mouth; she would hold me to that.

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12. Complications

Bella and I walked silently to biology. I was trying to focus myself on the moment, on the girl beside me, on what was real and solid, on anything that would keep Alice's deceitful, meaningless visions out of my head.

We passed Angela Weber, lingering on the sidewalk, discussing an assignment with a boy from her Trigonometry class. I scanned her thoughts perfunctorily, expecting more disappointment, only to be surprised by their wistful tenor.

Ah, so there *was* something Angela wanted. Unfortunately, it wasn't something that could be easily gift-wrapped.

I felt strangely comforted for a moment, hearing Angela's hopeless yearning. A sense of kinship that Angela would never know about passed through me, and I was, in that second, at one with the kind human girl.

It was oddly consoling to know that I wasn't the only one living out a tragic love story. Heartbreak was everywhere.

In the next second, I was abruptly and thoroughly irritated. Because Angela's story didn't *have* to be tragic. She was human and he was human and the difference that seemed so insurmountable in her head was ridiculous, truly ridiculous compared to my own situation. There was no *point* in her broken heart. What a wasteful sadness, when there was no valid reason for her not to be with the one she wanted. Why shouldn't she have what she wanted? Why shouldn't this one story have a happy ending?

I wanted to give her a gift… Well, I would give her what she wanted. Knowing what I did of human nature, it probably wouldn't even be very difficult. I sifted through the consciousness of the boy beside her, the object of her affections, and he did not seem unwilling, he was just stymied by the same difficulty she was. Hopeless and resigned, the way she was.

All I would have to do was plant the suggestion…

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The plan formed easily, the script wrote itself without effort on my part. I would need Emmett's help—getting him to go along with this was the only real difficulty. Human nature was so much easier to manipulate than vampire nature.

I was pleased with my solution, with my gift for Angela. It was a nice diversion from my own problems. Would that mine were as easily fixed.

My mood was slightly improved as Bella and I took our seats. Maybe I should be more positive. Maybe there was some solution out there for us that was escaping me, the way Angela's obvious solution was so invisible to her. Not likely… But why waste time with hopelessness? I didn't have time to waste when it came to Bella. Each second mattered.

Mr. Banner entered pulling an ancient TV and VCR. He was skipping through a section he wasn't particularly interested in—genetic disorders—by showing a movie for the next three days. *Lorenzo's Oil* was not a very cheerful piece, but that didn't stop the excitement in the room. No notes, no test-able material. Three free days. The humans exulted.

It didn't matter to me, either way. I hadn't been planning on paying any attention to anything but Bella.

I did not pull my chair away from hers today, to give myself space to breathe. Instead, I sat close beside her like any normal human would. Closer than we sat inside my car, close enough that the left side of my body felt submerged in the heat from her skin.

It was a strange experience, both enjoyable and nerve-racking, but I preferred this to sitting across the table from her. It was more than I was used to, and yet I quickly realized that it was not enough. I was not satisfied. Being this close to her only made me want to be closer still. The pull was stronger the closer I got.

I had accused her of being a magnet for danger. Right now, it felt like that was the literal truth. I *was* danger, and, with every inch I allowed myself nearer to her, her attraction grew in force.

And then Mr. Banner turned the lights out.

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It was odd how much of a difference this made, considering that the lack of light meant little to my eyes. I could still see just as perfectly as before. Every detail of the room was clear.

So why the sudden shock of electricity in the air, in this dark that was not dark to me? Was it because I knew that I was the only one who could see clearly? That both Bella and I were invisible to the others? Like we were alone, just the two of us, hidden in the dark room, sitting so close beside one another…

My hand moved toward her without my permission. Just to touch her hand, to hold it in the darkness. Would that be such a horrific mistake? If my skin bothered her, she only had to pull away…

I yanked my hand back, folded my arms tightly across my chest and clenched my hands closed. No mistakes. I'd promised myself that I would make no mistakes, no matter how minimal they seemed. If I held her hand, I would only want more—another insignificant touch, another move closer to her. I could feel that. A new kind of desire was growing in me, working to override my self-control.

No mistakes.

Bella folded her arms securely across her own chest, and her hands balled up into fists, just like mine.

What are you thinking? I was dying to whisper the words to her, but the room was too quiet to get away with even a whispered conversation.

The movie began, lightening the darkness just a bit. Bella glanced up at me. She noted the rigid way I held my body—just like hers—and smiled. Her lips parted slightly, and her eyes seemed full of warm invitations.

Or perhaps I was seeing what I wanted to see.

I smiled back; her breathing caught with a low gasp and she looked quickly away.

That made it worse. I didn't know her thoughts, but I was suddenly positive that I had been right before, and that she *wanted* me to touch her. She felt this dangerous desire just as I did.

Between her body and mine, the electricity hummed.

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She didn't move all through the hour, holding her stiff, controlled pose as I held mine. Occasionally she would peek at me again, and the humming current would jolt through me with a sudden shock.

The hour passed—slowly, and yet not slowly enough. This was so new, I could have sat like this with her for days, just to experience the feeling fully.

I had a dozen different arguments with myself while the minutes passed, rationality struggling with desire as I tried to justify touching her.

Finally, Mr. Banner turned the lights on again.

In the bright fluorescent light, the atmosphere of the room returned to normal. Bella sighed and stretched, flexing her fingers in front of her. It must have been uncomfortable for her to hold that position for so long. It was easier for me—stillness came naturally.

I chuckled at the relieved expression on her face. "Well, that was interesting."

"Umm," she murmured, clearly understanding what I referred to, but making no comment. What I wouldn't give to hear what she was thinking *right now*.

I sighed. No amount of wishing was going to help with that.

"Shall we?" I asked, standing.

She made a face and got unsteadily to her feet, her hands splayed out as if she were afraid she was going to fall.

I could offer her my hand. Or I could place that hand underneath her elbow—just lightly—and steady her. Surely that wouldn't be such a horrible infraction…

No mistakes.

She was very quiet as we walked toward the gym. The crease was in evidence between her eyes, a sign that she was deep in thought. I, too, was thinking deeply.

One touch of her skin wouldn't hurt her, my selfish side contended.

I could easily moderate the pressure of my hand. It wasn't exactly difficult, as long as I was firmly in control of myself. My tactile sense was better developed than a human's; I could juggle a dozen crystal goblets without breaking any of them; I could stroke a soap bubble without popping it. As long as I was firmly in control…

Bella was like a soap bubble—fragile and ephemeral. *Temporary*.

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How long would I be able to justify my presence in her life? How much time did I have? Would I have another chance like this chance, like this moment, like this second? She would not always be within my arm's reach…

Bella turned to face me at the gym's door, and her eyes widened at the expression on my face. She didn't speak. I looked at myself in the reflection of her eyes and saw the conflict raging in my own. I watched my face change as my better side lost the argument.

My hand lifted without a conscious command for it to do so. As gently as if she were made of the thinnest glass, as if she were fragile as a bubble, my fingers stroked the warm skin that covered her cheekbone. It heated under my touch, and I could feel the pulse of blood speed beneath her transparent skin.

Enough, I ordered, though my hand was aching to shape itself to the side of her face. *Enough*.

It was difficult to pull my hand back, to stop myself from moving closer to her than I already was. A thousand different possibilities ran through my mind in an instant—a thousand different ways to touch her. The tip of my finger tracing the shape of her lips. My palm cupping under her chin. Pulling the clip from her hair and letting it spill out across my hand. My arms winding around her waist, holding her against the length of my body.

Enough.

I forced myself to turn, to move away from her. My body moved stiffly—unwilling.

I let my mind linger behind to watch her as I walked swiftly away, almost running from the temptation. I caught Mike Newton's thoughts—they were the loudest—while he watched Bella walk past him in oblivion, her eyes unfocused and her cheeks red. He glowered and suddenly my name was mingled with curses in his head; I couldn't help grinning slightly in response.

My hand was tingling. I flexed it and then curled it into a fist, but it continued to sting painlessly.

No, I hadn't hurt her—but touching her had still been a mistake.

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It felt like fire—like the thirsting burn of my throat had spread throughout my entire body.

The next time I was close to her, would I be able to stop myself from touching her again? And if I touched her once, would I be able to stop at that?

No more mistakes. That was it. *Savor the memory, Edward,* I told myself grimly, *and keep your hands to yourself*. That, or I would have to force myself to leave…somehow. Because I couldn't allow myself near her if I insisted on making errors.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady my thoughts.

Emmett caught up to me outside the English building.

"Hey, Edward." *He's looking better. Weird, but better. Happy.*

"Hey, Em." Did I look happy? I supposed, despite the chaos in my head, I felt that way.

Way to keep your mouth shut, kid. Rosalie wants to rip your tongue out.

I sighed. "Sorry I left you to deal with that. Are you angry with me?"

"Naw. Rose'll get over it. It was bound to happen anyway." *With what Alice sees coming…*

Alice's visions were not what I wanted to think about right now. I stared forward, my teeth locking together.

As I searched for a distraction, I caught sight of Ben Cheney entering the Spanish room ahead of us. Ah—here was my chance to give Angela Weber her gift.

I stopped walking and caught Emmett's arm. "Hold on a second."

What's up?

"I know I don't deserve it, but would you do me a favor anyway?"

"What is it?" he asked, curious.

Under my breath—and at a speed that would have made the words incomprehensible to a human no matter how loud they'd been spoken—I explained to him what I wanted.

He stared at me blankly when I was done, his thoughts as blank as his face.

"So?" I prompted. "Will you help me do it?"

It took him a minute to respond. "But, *why*?"

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"C'mon, Emmett. Why *not*?"

Who are you and what have you done with my brother?

"Aren't you the one who complains that school is always the same? This is something a little different, isn't it? Consider it an experiment—an experiment in human nature."

He stared at me for another moment before he caved. "Well, it *is* different, I'll give you that… Okay, fine." Emmett snorted and then shrugged. "I'll help you."

I grinned at him, feeling more enthusiastic about my plan now that he was on board. Rosalie was a pain, but I would always owe her one for choosing Emmett; no one had a better brother than mine.

Emmett didn't need to practice. I whispered his lines to him once under my breath as we walked into the classroom.

Ben was already in his seat behind mine, assembling his homework to hand in. Emmett and I both sat and did the same thing. The classroom was not quiet yet; the murmur of subdued conversation would continue until Mrs. Goff called for attention. She was in no hurry, appraising the quizzes from the last class.

"So," Emmett said, his voice louder than necessary—if he were really speaking only to me. "Did you ask Angela Weber out yet?"

The sound of papers rustling behind me came to an abrupt stop as Ben froze, his attention suddenly riveted on our conversation.

Angela? They're talking about Angela?

Good. I had his interest.

"No," I said, shaking my head slowly to appear regretful.

"Why not?" Emmett improvised. "Are you chicken?"

I grimaced at him. "No. I heard that she was interested in someone else."

Edward Cullen was going to ask Angela *out? But… No. I don't like that. I don't want him near her. He's…not right for her. Not…safe.*

I hadn't anticipated the chivalry, the protective instinct. I'd been working for jealousy. But whatever worked.

"You're going to let that stop you?" Emmett asked scornfully, improvising again. "Not up for the competition?"

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I glared at him, but made used of what he gave me. "Look, I guess she really likes this Ben person. I'm not going to try to convince her otherwise. There are other girls."

The reaction in the chair behind me was electric.

"Who?" Emmett asked, back to the script.

"My lab partner said it was some kid named Cheney. I'm not sure I know who he is."

I bit back my smile. Only the haughty Cullens could get away with pretending not to know every student at this tiny school.

Ben's head was whirling with shock. *Me? Over Edward Cullen? But why would she like* me*?*

"Edward," Emmett muttered in a lower tone, rolling his eyes toward the boy. "He's right behind you," he mouthed, so obviously that the human could easily read the words.

"Oh," I muttered back.

I turned in my seat and glanced once at the boy behind me. For a second, the black eyes behind the glasses were frightened, but then he stiffened and squared his narrow shoulders, affronted by my clearly disparaging evaluation. His chin shot out and an angry flush darkened his golden-brown skin.

"Huh," I said arrogantly as I turned back to Emmett.

He thinks he's better than me. But Angela doesn't. I'll show him…

Perfect.

"Didn't you say she was taking Yorkie to the dance, though?" Emmett asked, snorting as he said the name of the boy that many scorned for his awkwardness.

"That was a group decision apparently." I wanted to be sure that Ben was clear on this. "Angela's shy. If B—well, if a guy doesn't have the nerve to ask her out, she'd never ask him."

"You like shy girls," Emmett said, back to improvisation. *Quiet girls. Girls like…hmm, I don't know. Maybe Bella Swan?*

I grinned at him. "Exactly." Then I returned to the performance. "Maybe Angela will get tired of waiting. Maybe I'll ask her to the prom."

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No, you won't, Ben thought, straightening up in his chair. *So what if she's so much taller than me? If she doesn't care, then neither do I. She's the nicest, smartest, prettiest girl in this school… and she wants* me.

I liked this Ben. He seemed bright and well-meaning. Maybe even worthy of a girl like Angela.

I gave Emmett a thumbs up under the desk as Mrs. Goff stood and greeted the class.

Okay, I'll admit it—that was sort of fun, Emmett thought.

I smiled to myself, pleased that I'd been able to shape one love story's happy ending. I was positive that Ben would follow through, and Angela would receive my anonymous gift. My debt was repaid.

How silly humans were, to let a six inch height differential confound their happiness.

My success put me in a good mood. I smiled again as I settled into my chair and prepared to be entertained. After all, as Bella had pointed out at lunch, I'd never seen her in action in her gym class before.

Mike's thoughts were the easiest to pinpoint in the babble of voices that swarmed through the gym. His mind had gotten far too familiar over the last few weeks. With a sigh, I resigned myself to listening through him. At least I could be sure that he would be paying attention to Bella.

I was just in time to hear him offer to be her badminton partner; as he made the suggestion, other partnerings ran through his mind. My smile faded, my teeth clenched together, and I had to remind myself that murdering Mike Newton was not a permissible option.

"Thanks, Mike—you don't have to do this, you know."

"Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way."

They grinned at each other, and flashes of numerous accidents—always in some way connected to Bella—flashed through Mike's head.

Mike played alone at first, while Bella hesitated on the back half of the court, holding her racket gingerly, as if it was some kind of weapon. Then Coach Clapp ambled by and ordered Mike to let Bella play.

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Uh oh, Mike thought as Bella moved forward with a sigh, holding her racquet at an awkward angle.

Jennifer Ford served the birdie directly toward Bella with a smug twist to her thoughts. Mike saw Bella lurch toward it, swinging the racket yards wide of her target, and he rushed in to try to save the volley.

I watched the trajectory of Bella's racquet with alarm. Sure enough, it hit the taut net and sprung back at her, clipping her forehead before it spun out to strike Mike's arm with a resounding *thwack*.

Ow. Ow. Ungh. That's going to leave a bruise.

Bella was kneading her forehead. It was hard to stay in my seat where I belonged, knowing she was hurt. But what could I do, if I were there? And it didn't seem to be serious… I hesitated, watching. If she intended to continue to try to play, I was going to have to manufacture an excuse to pull her out of class.

The coach laughed. *"Sorry, Newton." That girl's the worst jinx I've ever seen. Shouldn't inflict her on the others…*

He turned his back deliberately and moved to watch another game so that Bella could return to her former spectator's role.

Ow, Mike thought again, massaging his arm. He turned to Bella. *"Are you okay?"*

"Yeah, are you?" she asked sheepishly, blushing.

"I think I'll make it." Don't want to sound like a crybaby. But, man, that hurts!

Mike swung his arm in a circle, wincing.

"I'll just stay back here," Bella said, embarrassment and chagrin on her face rather than pain. Maybe Mike had got the worst of it. I certainly *hoped* that was the case. At least she wasn't playing anymore. She held her racquet so carefully behind her back, her eyes wide with remorse… I had to disguise my laugh as coughing.

What's funny? Emmett wanted to know.

"Tell you later," I muttered.

Bella didn't venture into the game again. The coach ignored her and let Mike play alone.

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I breezed through the quiz at the end of the hour, and Mrs. Goff let me go early. I was listening intently to Mike as I walked across the campus. He'd decided to confront Bella about me.

Jessica swears they're dating. Why? Why did he have to pick her?

He didn't recognize the real phenomenon—that she'd picked *me*.

"So."

"So what?" she wondered.

"You and Cullen, huh?" You and the freak. I guess, if a rich guy is that important to you...

I gritted my teeth at his degrading assumption.

"That's none of your business, Mike."

Defensive. So it's true. Crap. "I don't like it."

"You don't have to," she snapped.

Why can't she see what a circus sideshow he is? Like they all are. The way he stares at her. It gives me chills to watch. "He looks at you like…like you're something to eat."

I cringed, waiting for her response.

Her face turned bright red, and her lips pressed together like she was holding her breath. Then, suddenly, a giggle burst through her lips.

Now she's laughing at me. Great.

Mike turned, thoughts sullen, and wandered off to change.

I leaned against the gym wall and tried to compose myself.

How could she have laughed at Mike's accusation—so entirely on target that I began to worry that Forks was becoming too *aware*… Why would she laugh at the suggestion that I could kill her, when she knew that it was entirely true? Where was the humor in that?

What was *wrong* with her?

Did she have morbid sense of humor? That didn't fit with my idea of her character, but how could I be sure? Or maybe my daydream of the giddy angel was true in the one respect, in that she had no sense of fear at all. Brave—that was one word for it. Others might say stupid, but I knew how bright she was. No matter what the reason,

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though, this lack of fear or twisted sense of humor wasn't good for her. Was it this strange lack that put her in danger so constantly? Maybe she would always need me here…

Just like that, my mood was soaring.

If I could just discipline myself, make myself safe, then perhaps it would be right for me to stay with her.

When she walked through the gym doors, her shoulders were stiff and her lower lip was between her teeth again—a sign of anxiety. But as soon as her eyes met mine, her rigid shoulders relaxed and a wide smile spread across her face. It was an oddly peaceful expression. She walked right to my side without hesitation, only stopping when she was so close that her body heat crashed over me like a tidal wave.

"Hi," she whispered.

The happiness I felt in this moment was, again, without precedent.

"Hello," I said, and then—because with my mood suddenly so light I couldn't resist teasing her—I added, "How was gym?"

Her smile wavered. "Fine."

She was a poor liar.

"Really?" I asked, about to press the issue—I was still concerned about her head; was she in pain?—but then Mike Newton's thoughts we so loud they broke my concentration.

I hate *him. I wish he would die. I hope he drives that shiny car right off a cliff. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Stick to his own kind—to the freaks.*

"What?" Bella demanded.

My eyes refocused on her face. She looked at Mike's retreating back, and then at me again.

"Newton's getting on my nerves," I admitted.

Her mouth fell open, and her smile disappeared. She must have forgotten that I'd had the power to watch through her calamitous last hour, or hoped that I hadn't utilized it. "You weren't listening again?"

"How's your head?"

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"You're unbelievable!" she said through her teeth, and then she turned away from me and stalked furiously toward the parking lot. Her skin flushed dark red—she was embarrassed.

I kept pace with her, hoping that her anger would pass soon. She was usually quick to forgive me.

"You were the one who mentioned how I'd never seen you in Gym," I explained. "It made me curious."

She didn't answer; her eyebrows pulled together.

She came to a sudden halt in the parking lot when she realized that the way to my car was blocked by a crowd of male students.

I wonder how fast they've gone in this thing…

Look at the SMG shift paddles. I've never seen those outside of a magazine…

Nice side grills…

Sure wish I had sixty thousand dollars laying around…

This was exactly why it was better for Rosalie to only use her car out of town.

I wound through the throng of lustful boys to my car; after a second of hesitation, Bella followed suit.

"Ostentatious," I muttered as she climbed in.

"What kind of car is that?" she wondered.

"An M3."

She frowned. "I don't speak *Car and Driver*."

"It's a BMW." I rolled my eyes and then focused on backing out without running anyone down. I had to lock eyes with a few boys that didn't seem willing to move out of my way. A half-second meeting my gaze seemed to be enough to convince them.

"Are you still angry?" I asked her. Her frown had relaxed.

"Definitely," she answered curtly.

I sighed. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up. Oh well. I could try to make amends, I supposed. "Will you forgive me if I apologize?"

She thought about that for a moment. "Maybe…if you mean it," she decided. "*And* if you promise not to do it again."

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I wasn't going to lie to her, and there was no way I was agreeing to *that*. Perhaps if I offered her a different exchange.

"How about if I mean it, *and* I agree to let you drive this Saturday?" I cringed internally at the thought.

The furrow popped into existence between her eyes as she considered the new bargain. "Deal," she said after a moment of thought.

Now for my apology… I'd never *tried* to dazzle Bella on purpose before, but now seemed like a good time. I stared deep into her eyes as I drove away from the school, wondering if I was doing it right. I used my most persuasive tone.

"Then I'm very sorry I upset you."

Her heartbeat thudded louder than before, and the rhythm was abruptly staccato. Her eyes widened, looking a little stunned.

I half-smiled. It seemed like I'd gotten it right. Of course, I was having a bit of difficulty looking away from her eyes, too. Equally dazzled. It was a good thing I had this road memorized.

"And I'll be on your doorstep bright and early Saturday morning," I added, finishing the agreement.

She blinked swiftly, shaking her head as if to clear it. "Um," she said, "it doesn't help with the Charlie situation if an unexplained Volvo is left in the driveway."

Ah, how little she still knew me. "I wasn't intending to bring a car."

"How—" she started to ask.

I interrupted her. The answer would be hard to explain without a demonstration, and now was hardly the time. "Don't worry about it. I'll be there, no car."

She put her head on one side, and looked for a second like she was going to press for more, but then she seemed to change her mind.

"Is it later yet?" she asked, reminding me of our unfinished conversation in the cafeteria today; she'd let go of one difficult question just to return another that was more unappealing.

"I suppose it is later," I agreed unwillingly.

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I parked in front of her house, tensing as I tried to think of how to explain…without making my monstrous nature too evident, without frightening her again. Or was that wrong? To minimalize my darkness?

She waited with the same politely interested mask she'd worn at lunch. If I'd been less anxious, her preposterous calm would have made me laugh.

"And you still want to know why you can't see me hunt?" I asked.

"Well, mostly I was wondering about your reaction," she said.

"Did I frighten you?" I asked, positive that she would deny it.

"No."

I tried not to smile, and failed. "I apologize for scaring you." And then my smile vanished with the momentary humor. "It was just the very thought of you being there…while we hunted."

"That would be bad?"

The mental picture was too much—Bella, so vulnerable in the empty darkness; myself, out of control… I tried to banish it from my head. "Extremely."

"Because…?"

I took a deep breath, concentrating for one moment on the burning thirst. Feeling it, managing it, proving my dominion over it. It would never control me again—I willed that to be true. I *would* be safe for her. I stared at the welcome clouds without seeing them, wishing I could believe that my determination would make any difference if I were hunting when I crossed her scent.

"When we hunt…we give ourselves over to our senses," I told her, thinking through each word before I spoke it. "Govern less with our minds. Especially our sense of smell. If you were anywhere near me when I lost control that way…"

I shook my head in agony at the thought of what would—not what *could*, but what *would*—surely happen then.

I listened to the spike in her heartbeat, and then turned, restless, to read her eyes.

Bella's face was composed, her eyes grave. Her mouth was pursed just slightly in what I guessed was concern. But concern for what? Her own safety? Or my anguish? I continued to stare at her, trying to translate her ambiguous expression into sure fact.

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She gazed back. Her eyes grew wider after a moment, and her pupils dilated, though the light had not changed.

My breathing accelerated, and suddenly the quiet in the car seemed to be humming, just like in the darkened biology room this afternoon. The pulsing current raced between us again, and my desire to touch her was, briefly, stronger even than the demands of my thirst.

The throbbing electricity made it feel like I had a pulse again. My body sang with it. Like I was human. More than anything in the world, I wanted to feel the heat of her lips against mine. For one second, I struggled desperately to find the strength, the control, to able to put my mouth so close to her skin…

She sucked in a ragged breath, and only then did I realize that when I had started breathing faster, she had stopped breathing altogether.

I closed my eyes, trying to break the connection between us.

No more mistakes.

Bella's existence was tied to a thousand delicately balanced chemical processes, all so easily disrupted. The rhythmic expansion of her lungs, the flow of oxygen, was life or death to her. The fluttering cadence of her fragile heart could be stopped by so many stupid accidents or illnesses or…by me.

I did not believe that any member of my family would hesitate if he or she were offered a chance back—if he or she could trade immortality for mortality again. Any one of us would stand in fire for it. Burn for as many days or centuries as were necessary.

Most of our kind prized immortality above anything else. There were even humans who craved this, who searched in dark places for those who could give them the blackest of gifts…

Not us. Not my family. We would trade anything to be human.

But none of us had ever been as desperate for a way back as I was now.

I stared at the microscopic pits and flaws in the windshield, like there was some solution hidden in the glass. The electricity had not faded, and I had to concentrate to keep my hands on the wheel.

My right hand began to sting without pain again, from when I'd touched her before.

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"Bella, I think you should go inside now."

She obeyed at once, without comment, getting out of the car and shutting the door behind herself. Did she feel the potential for disaster as clearly as I did?

Did it hurt her to leave, as it hurt me to let her go? The only solace was that I would see her soon. Sooner than she would see me. I smiled at that, then rolled the window down and leaned across to speak to her one more time—it was safer now, with the heat of her body outside the car.

She turned to see what I wanted, curious.

Still curious, though she'd asked me so many questions today. My own curiosity was entirely unsatisfied; answering her questions today had only revealed my secrets—I'd gotten little from her but my own conjectures. That wasn't fair.

"Oh, Bella?"

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow it's my turn."

Her forehead puckered. "Your turn to what?"

"Ask the questions." Tomorrow, when we were in a safer place, surrounded by witnesses, I would get my own answers. I grinned at the thought, and then I turned away because she made no move to leave. Even with her outside of the car, the echo of the electricity zinged in the air. I wanted to get out, too, to walk her to her door as an excuse to stay beside her…

No more mistakes. I hit the gas, and then sighed as she disappeared behind me. It seemed like I was always running toward Bella or running away from her, never staying in place. I would have to find some way to hold my ground if we were ever going to have any peace.

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